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My Journey on Becoming a Critical Social Justice Educator as a Woman of Color

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América López

Claremont Graduate University

Teacher Education Program

Abstract

This writing is a narrative that retells different stages throughout my life, including the different experiences I have endured being a graduate student and a first-year teacher at the same time. Its purpose is to share my journey from the beginning to the end of my first year as a teacher. I share my reflections as I continuously look back on how I began to slowly-but surely-develop my criticality lens. While being a graduate student [of color] in a space that was historically and intentionally not created for me, this roller coaster ride has been anything but easy. However, I have acquired a vast amount of knowledge that I would not have imagined a few years ago. Throughout this work, I share glimpses of my life and how all of it has shaped me into pushing me to do the constant work that is required so that I can continue working towards becoming not only a critical social justice educator, but an advocate for my students, an ally for students of color who do the best they can to navigate the educational system, and anti-racist [educator].

Preface

This ethnographic work has developed throughout this journey. Working on this thesis has allowed me to reflect on what it means to be a critical social justice for me and how I can embody this in my classroom, as well as outside of it. Challenges were faced as I tried to conduct interviews with my students. I am grateful that everything ended up working out at the end. I would also like to share that working on home visits, case studies interviews, and working on this ethnography has been a challenge; teaching on top of this made it all the more challenging and overwhelming oftentimes. To say the least, this work has been a long time coming and would like to share my experiences through this work.

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Part A: Journey to Teaching

My Positionality

I come from quite a big family. My mom was originally born in a small country in Central America called *EL Salvador* and my dad was born in México, so yes that makes me half Mexican and half *Salvadoreña*. I have seven aunts and uncles from my mom's side, and on my dad's side...well, let's just say that most of the time I forget the names of my aunts, uncles, and cousins. My *abuelita*, my grandmother from my dad's side gave birth to sixteen children. I stopped trying to figure out the names of each aunt and uncle because frankly, there are too many. Believe it or not, it can be a stressful thing. So every time I visit my family on my dad's side, I refer to my aunts or uncles as simply aunt or uncle, or as we say in Spanish, *tía* and *tío*. Spanish was the dominant language that was spoken around the house while growing up; it still is. Just like the majority of native speakers of a language that is not English, I learned to speak English at school. Apparently I was not so good at English in the beginning. Who would have thought? My mom recalls that I would come home from school and would suddenly "forget" how to speak Spanish. Being the mom she is, she ensured that I not forget how to speak my first language by having all conversations in Spanish. Of course, I was expected to answer back in Spanish, there were no shortcuts.

My mom is considered to be first-generation in our entire family; she was the first one to create a life of her own in the United States. She has been the pioneer out of all her siblings, as she is the eldest out of eight children. Growing up, I remember being raised by my mom, my aunts, and uncles. They all taught me something different that has molded me into the person I am today. Some of my *tías* taught me how to properly wash dishes (you leave the cups faced down and stack the plates on the rack), one of my uncles taught me how to add/subtract math

without a calculator as a little girl, and they all taught me different lessons about life. I grew up in a single-parent household for the majority of my life. My parents decided to split up when I was very little; their relationship always seemed to be an on-and-off basis due to my father's unwillingness to settle down and create a stable family. I only have what are vague memories of my parents and I living together the first few years of my life. And although my mom essentially raised me on her own (with the help and support of her brothers and sisters), my father tried to remain present throughout my life despite his workaholic routine of life. He just was not the kind of father who did things such as attend school meetings or verbally express emotions towards another person. He is what many refer to as the stereotypical Mexican dad who demonstrates tough love through life lessons, *consejos*, but no "mushy" affection. My grandparents have carried with them this idea that a man does not cry, but is rather hard-working and "sucks it up" and "is a man." Quite frankly, my father has not unpacked any of his traumas due to the traditional and toxic stigma that comes with mental wellness and seeking therapy. I have only seen him cry twice in my entire life. Did I mention I am currently twenty-seven years old?

When I was about three years old, my mom and my *tíos* bought a house together in an ever-so-beautiful, small city called Altadena, just north of Pasadena; it is in essence, Pasadena but with less city noise and endless rows of trees. Back then, Altadena was more of a rural area. People riding horses down the block was viewed as a normal thing to do. When I would take small walks in my old neighborhood, my mom and I would say, "Oh there goes so and so riding his horse as usual," and wave hello. Many who lived in Altadena owned small *ranchos*, filled with horses, chickens, and other sorts of animals you tend to see in a ranch. I loved Altadena. Now that I look back and reflect, it makes perfect sense that I felt that way; having lived where I

did during my childhood allowed me to create an infinite amount of memories that I am fond of. It too, plays a huge role in who I am today.

Looking back, my family was considered to be middle-class in many ways. We lived in the biggest house on the entire block, we were financially stable, and the bills were always paid. That, however was not the case for everyone in Altadena. If a person lived towards the southern area of Altadena, they were considered to be more *ghetto*, as some would call it. As for my family, we lived on the northern side of town. The northern side of the city was closer to the mountains. Growing up, I had no familiarity of other cities other than Los Angeles and Pasadena, as it overlaps with Altadena. Everything outside of my hometown felt strange, different, and unfamiliar. My home, school, and other family members' homes were the only places I knew and felt comfortable with. Being raised in a single-parent household made it more challenging for my mother to free up her busy work schedule and go out as a family. Did I mention that *mamá* used to always wake me up early on Sundays for Catholic mass? Oh how I strongly disliked waking up early as a child on a Sunday morning. It was something I dreaded every week.

Even school, however was not the nicest place to be at times. At least my middle school was not. The middle school I attended was, like the southern side of my neighborhood, considered to be "ghetto." My school was, however, not the most friendliest place to be. On my very first day of middle school, a fight had already broken out before the first period bell had even rung- in front of my feet. So much for feeling less intimidated of middle school. To me, my (middle) school did not seem "ghetto." Perhaps it was partly due me having been accustomed to my surroundings, my community, and the people; in a way, I was similar to that of an Angeleno smog breather that Beverly Tatum describes (Delpit (2012), p. 12). Just like the Angeleno smog breather, I did not know any better and was unaware of what I was metaphorically inhaling.

Before you even step foot onto campus, anxiety and fear was felt. For the most part, Washington Middle School had an intense environment, in not a good way. Our beautiful tree-filled campus that complimented the old architectural campus, similar to historical buildings you can find in Pasadena, (long, tall columns on houses and buildings) was just that. For the environment at Washington Middle was almost like survival of the fittest. At least one fight occurred on a daily basis. The quality of education as well as motivation always seemed to be lacking from many teachers, especially veterans (surprising, is it not?). This was not the case for all teachers. I seemed to notice a pattern, however, in the quality of content that students were exposed (and not exposed) to. It is unfortunate that this is nothing new but is a pattern that has been occurring all throughout history. This “pattern” is seen more in schools where the majority of the demographics are students of color. A lot of my older teachers also lacked a diversity of teaching strategies in their repertoire. It was because of this that I struggled so much as a middle school student. While I thought that I would be able to push this to the side and simply get a C in some of my classes, this lack of content understanding became more apparent my freshman year of high school. Thus, I became another statistic in the data of students of color on this so-called “achievement gap” (if that is what some like to refer to subtractive schooling and lack of resources for students of color as).

My mom wanted me to receive more of an equitable and overall quality education, so she decided to use my aunt’s address to enroll me in a “better” school district. Initially, I was very hesitant. A new school, let alone a whole new district meant I would not continue to go to school with my childhood friends. It meant being in an unfamiliar territory, with a different student demographic. What terrified me the most was the thought of having no friends as an incoming freshman.

"Where are all the Black people?" I asked myself out loud as I looked at the campus up and down before I entered its gates. I still remember that day vividly. As an adult, I now realize I had endured culture shock the first two years of high school. I just could not believe it. Not only were there hardly any Black students, but I also struggled to find someone who looked like me. The students of color who did attend school there felt this sort of need to oppress their cultural backgrounds, which infuriated me because I was always around students of color who did not oppress nor felt shame on their culture and native language. It made me feel even more alone on this unfamiliar campus. This initial transition from middle school to high school was a difficult one for me in many ways. As I mentioned prior, I went in to high school without knowing anybody, except for my cousin who would already be going into her junior year. Aside from this, I was not accustomed to being surrounded by a demographic of students that was completely foreign to me. I felt like a foreigner stepping onto unknown territory. At this moment in time, my social status went from middle class to lower class. My mom decided to move out of our family house in Altadena and moved in with my stepdad by the time I began high school. She and her partner bought a house, but over the course they began to struggle paying the mortgage. This new life-new school, new friends, new city, new home-made my high school transition all the more difficult. I definitely did not look forward to school. I did not know anyone, and the students whom I believed I might be able to connect with disregarded their cultural identities completely. It is as if they felt shame and had disowned their ancestors and a part of their identity. *Who can I speak Spanish with? Where are all the Black students at? I hate it here,* I would tell myself often. And why were the only four Black students in the entire campus wearing neat vests, preppy-looking, and not have other Black friends? I could not wrap my head around any of this.

Transitioning from middle to high school was also challenging because this new school has a reputation of excelling in academics and student involvement. A lot of the students were extremely competitive in order to have the best grades possible at all times. I was unable to do this the first semester there because I was not accustomed to such workload, challenging myself, learning how to analyze and develop a habit of critical thinking. I struggled my first semester as a freshman; I had straight Cs, aside from P.E. class. Despite my grades being what they were, I was very appreciative of receiving an honest grade that was based on my overall understanding of content in class and the kind of work that I was turning in. This allowed me to self-assess myself on how I could raise my grades. Like Hammond mentions in her book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain* (2015), I was one of many students who was part of the “learning gap.” She mentions that, “As educators, we have to recognize that we help maintain the achievement gap when we don’t teach advanced cognitive skills to students we label as ‘disadvantaged’ because of their language, gender, race, or socioeconomic status. Many children start school with small [“learning gaps”], but as they progress through school, the gap between African Americans and Latino and White students grows because we don’t teach them how to be independent learners” (p. 14). Going on from what Hammond states, I lacked certain content knowledge and also abilities that limited my understanding in the ninth grade. It is unfortunate that this learning gap in students of all ages has been more evident over the course. Many teachers either make or maintain their students as dependent learners rather than independent ones. Unlike the independent learner, the dependent learner, “On his own...is not able to do complex, school-oriented learning tasks such as synthesizing and analyzing informational text without continuous support” (p. 13).

My Decision to Be a Teacher

Growing up, I always gravitated towards education and teaching. Although back then I was not quite sure why, one of the reasons why I am pursuing this career now is because I believe there should be teachers in the classroom who are willing to be advocates for their students and provide them an equitable education, regardless of a student's socioeconomic background. That is one of the characteristics I aspire to constantly work towards. As a critical social justice educator, I also want my students to feel safe when they enter our classroom. Based on my own experiences, there have been countless occasions where I have witnessed teachers trying to cover content in class. While covering content is in fact part of a teacher's many responsibilities, it should not take away from building strong relationships and trust with students. In my opinion, that style of teaching is so...meh. I believe that building and also maintaining strong relationships with students is critical when it comes to teaching. Smith, Fisher, and Frey mention the importance of getting to know your students in their second chapter. It mentions an example of a teacher, Ms. Stewart, who was having a difficult time with her student, Afia. "Afia refused to participate in groups, did not complete assignments, and often tore up papers that Ms. Stewart would give her. She also said rude things both to her classmates and to her teacher. but Ms. Stewart did not give up on Afia-in fact, she resolved to meet with Afia weekly to try getting to know her better" (p. 28). As Ms. Stewart's student gained more trust in her, she finally told her about the horrors of war back in Pakistan and her witnessing the killing of her brother. Being able to do similar to what Ms. Stewart did opens up more opportunities for student-teacher conversations. This is an advantage because it allows the teacher to view his or her students as more than just students in a classroom, but rather as individuals who also have a voice outside of it. As Maya Angelou once said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will

forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” To this I say touché Ms. Angelou.

What and Who Do I Want to Teach?

As a novice teacher, I want to teach students in the elementary school age level. I would preferably love to teach kindergarten or second grade. The reasons why I would love to teach these two grade levels is because first and foremost, I love when things are color-coded in general and when classrooms are filled with an endless amount of colors and textures. If you walk into a kindergarten classroom, that is what it consists of and I just love it. Another reason why I would love to teach kindergarten is because students typically begin to build their own perspectives about school on this sole experience. For many students, kindergarten is their first time being in a structured classroom, so if their experience was not a positive one, it is difficult to change their perspective about school until that cycle comes to a halt in another classroom. As for second grade, I would enjoy teaching that grade level because it is where students are a bit older and can take on greater responsibilities than the lower grade levels. I would also love to challenge those specific students with hands-on projects and see the outcome of it all. Also, I would want myself to contribute towards bridging my students’ learning gap so they can move on to the next grade successfully.

The Role of Critical Social Justice

Before I had a deeper understanding about critical social justice, I had no clue the important role it plays in the classroom. I want to be able to empower all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status. I envision myself to be a teacher who is sensitive to other students’ cultures and any historical context behind it. Ayers & Alexander-Tanner (2010) give examples about teachers who use historical events in order to engage students, while being sensitive to

students' culture at the same time (p. 77). Critical social justice has also allowed myself to strive in becoming this educator who acknowledges her students' cultures, being respectful towards each one, and asking other students to do the same.

While it can be challenging to leave our biases to the side as educators or teachers, it is necessary in order to allow every student an equal opportunity to succeed in the classroom. In my personal life and experiences, an implicit bias that might possibly hinder my ability to be an effective teacher to all my students would be assuming that students from a specific racial group might be smarter than other students. However, I can use my strengths and set my assumptions aside and teach all of my students equally, rather than teaching students whom I assume are higher achievers, a different curriculum. My goal is not to form academic segregation in my classroom but teaching them through what Tomlinson calls it, *differentiated instruction*.

Assets and Needs

I would say that one of my academic, learning, socio-cultural strengths is that I typically tend to be sensitive when it comes to other people's cultural values. When I went to college as an undergrad, I became a lot more exposed to diversity due to a diverse student demographic at school. Associating myself with a wide range of groups, such as students of color, professors, international students, etc., taught me about different cultures while being able to find a common ground at the same time. While that may be one of my strengths, an area that still is a work in progress are my socio-emotional skills. The entire process of forming good habits along and putting these skills into play is a bit of a challenge for me at times. Because my mother did not make it a habit to ask me about my emotions growing up, I came to have a difficult time when it came to verbally expressing my emotions and opinions about ideas. It did not mean that I did not have viewpoints, I was just lacking that skill. I had a deficit that I was completely unaware of

that began to affect me as I got older. As an adult, the lack of socio-emotional abilities got in the way when trying to form and maintain close relationships with others.

Goals

Pursuing a career in education has taught me a lot in short amount of time. My goals for my first year teaching is to be consistent as much as possible. Students who have some form of structure in their classroom, such as their teacher maintaining consistency, allows less room for student behaviors and leaves more time for student engagement and learning. Being consistent also leads to students becoming more independent of themselves because they will be aware of the different transitions throughout our schedule. Having worked with at-risk youth in a predominantly low-income community, I am also aware of the lack of consistency many students face once school is over; I was also one of those students who lacked consistency at home and would much rather have been at school than going home most of my days. With this being said, I would like to create routines and class rituals where students will eventually be able to carry out the activity themselves with me slightly facilitating when needed. This leads me on to my next goal, which is fostering my students' capabilities to become more independent. I plan to do this by constantly building their confidence through positive affirmations, Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), social-emotional learning pedagogy, and communicating with my students that our classroom is a safe space (this will be communicated in multiple forms, verbally and non-verbally).

As an incoming teacher, one of the challenges that I anticipate revolves a lot around time management and lesson planning, more specifically planning units that will target the different needs of *all* of my students. I worry whether my team will be supportive or leave me on my own. This is especially stressful as an incoming teacher. I can multitask, something I have found is

quite helpful in the education world, especially for a teacher. I still anticipate this whole idea of managing my time wisely in the classroom and covering enough content. It worries me that my students will not learn everything I would want them to. I want them to be prepared to go on to the next grade level successfully. One of the resources that I will most likely go to seek help will probably be my cohort this year and ask them for advice on how to tackle this challenge. Another route I can go is asking another teacher at my school for advice that may not necessarily be on time management, but general advice for new teachers.

I believe that being a highly effective teacher requires self-reflection on one's teaching strategies and the quality of the lesson. In order to become better, it is crucial to take in constructive criticism every now and then. The way in which I would assess myself in order to meet my goals would be by having a class discussion about my teaching strategies, what was more efficient and engaging, and what did not work for different lessons. I can also assess myself by preparing my lesson plans ahead of time. By doing so, I can go over it and include extra content towards the end if I were to hypothetically finish early or if I have students who finish quicker than others. This would result in wasting less time and providing more student knowledge. Pre-assessing my students in the beginning of a unit would also be a great way to see the level of each student. Tomlinson states that, "Diagnostic pre-assessment routinely takes place as a unit begins, to shed light on individuals' particular needs and interests in relation to the unit's goals" (p. 8). I aspire to become a socially-just educator that students strongly need in schools due to things like the learning gap in schools. In the not-so-distant-future, I plan on challenging my students by transitioning them into independent learners in order for them to thrive both in and outside of school.

Part B: *My Students*

Introduction

The following sections are on three case studies that were conducted on three specific students. These case studies include home visits that were conducted for this section. Students were also interviewed at school after school hours with the consent of a parent and/or guardian. Each case study has been given in-depth reflection and a vast amount of observation as well as reflecting on their individual needs.

Case Study 1: Zara

She has dark brown eyes and carries herself timidly, oftentimes insecure of herself and the actions she makes, her answers almost always sounding like a question. Zara¹ is a brown-skinned six-year-old girl with long, straight, dark hair. She has brown almond-shaped eyes and is of Latin American descent. Her parents are from Guatemala and are fluent Spanish speakers. Zara is a bright girl, filled with joy and innocence when you look into her eyes as you speak to her. She is a brave girl and tries hard to remain positive whenever a problem-big or small-arises at school. Sometimes when I ask either the entire class or just Zara what they played during recess, she will not hesitate to let me know whether she had fun playing or if someone was either not being nice to her or did not want to play with her on the playground. This leaves Zara feeling disillusioned, as she tells me what happened, tears rolling down her eyes as her body lightly trembles as she struggles to tell me the entire incident. Her shy and insecure personality both in and outside of school has always left me wondering what event(s) has caused Zara to be this timid girl who stays in her shell most of her days.

Zara is a friendly girl, one who is willing to collaborate with each one of her classmates. It is quite rare for her to feel upset. I have yet to witness the upset version of Zara. I have not

seen her express any anger emotions before. She also does not hesitate to use her words to express when her feelings have been hurt. Although, I have noticed slight hesitance when she knows she needs help in class and is unable to decide whether to ask or figure it out on her own. Zara is a friendly girl. She is so friendly to others out on the playground that sometimes she gets shunned by the stereotypical not-so-friendly “girly girls.” This results in her socializing less with peers who are her grade level. She tends to be quite shy when it comes to socializing either with students she does not know or students who tend to have a leader personality. Although she goes to the same class and knows all the students there, she still will not go out of her way to make new friends during Response to Intervention, or RTI, rotations. Zara tends to stay in her comfort zone, both inside and outside the classroom. For instance, when given the choice of using one application on the iPads over the other application, she gravitates towards the one she feels more comfortable and confident using, because she, “is not too good at [the math app]” (Z. Garcia, personal communication, September 27, 2019). Rather than choosing another application on the iPad during iPad time, Zara gravitates towards the same one she usually uses.

Academic Standing

Zara is just at grade level; however, she needs to continue to develop her spelling abilities and blending sounds to form words. She is excelling in math, specifically addition and subtraction concepts as of this moment in time. Zara has a developing understanding about the order of addends, what addition sentences are, and its relation to creating new number sentences. Her friendly personality allows her to work both effectively and collaboratively in groups. Zara excels in independent reading. One of her favorite parts of reading independently is reading a new book she checked out at our library on Friday afternoons. She has been excelling

in English language arts, specifically on completing thinking maps (bubble and tree maps so far) based on specific topics. She is all about the details, as is evident in all her drawings. She can relate all her drawings back to her writing without any confusion or hesitation. Zara is an English learner student in class. It would be difficult to pinpoint her as being an EL because of she speaks fluent English. I was surprised that Zara was considered an English Learner (EL), or as García and Kleifgen (2010) state, "We prefer, and use here, the term emergent bilingual because it has become obvious to us that much educational inequity is derived from obfuscating the fact that a meaningful education will not only turn these English learners into English proficient students, but more significantly, into bilingual and multilingual students and adults" (García and Kleifgen, 2010, p. 4).

She faces some challenges when it comes to critical thinking, especially when it seems that other students understand either the question or the overall concept right away. She can complete assignments that have been frontloaded and has received extra scaffolding. Zara seems to be out of her comfort level when I ask the class to work on tasks that involve a deeper level of thinking. Perhaps she feels that students around her are smarter than she is because they finish tasks quicker than her. With a bit of encouragement, Zara straightens her composure, eyes lighting up, and begins working on the task that a minute ago, felt impossible to her. This boosts her confidence more and slowly but surely shares more of her personality. I have noticed that one of the challenges she faces is being able to find the appropriate terminology she wants to use to verbally express her thoughts and ideas. Her timid persona builds an invisible wall that does not allow her to voluntarily speak up in front of her classmates often. In "Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain," Hammond (2015) explains the process that occurs in a student's brain: "When the amygdala sounds its alarm, with cortisol, all other cognitive functions

such as learning, problem solving, or creative thinking stop. An amygdala hijack leads to our natural ‘fight, flight, freeze, or appease’ responses” (p. 40). She explains how the amygdala in the brain acts as the brain’s guard dog. This plays a crucial factor in the development of Zara’s speaking abilities. She more than likely will stumble upon her words, especially when I ask her a *why* question or what her thoughts are to an idea. She begins to stutter and begins to feel insecure of herself all over again. I smile at her and tell her, “It’s okay Zara, there is no right or wrong answer. I just want to know what *you* think.”

It seems that Zara tends to struggle with math word problems. She struggles in this area because she is still learning how to read, spell, and sound out words that are beginning to have different blends, such as *-br*, *-tr*, and *-sl*. Her reading skills are at the emerging stage. Zara’s listening skills are above grade level and has a good memory, almost as if it were photographic. She will remember the slightest details and how a word was spelled on the spelling words chart days after the chart is no longer up. She struggles with math word problems that involve deeper critical thinking to figure out the answer, although it seems to be that Zara is overall challenged when a concept requires the combination of multiple concepts. I have been noticing this more whenever I allow students the opportunity to work on a question or task on their own after whole group instruction. She will look down to examine her paper and look around, then reexamine her paper once more and will begin to fidget with her pencil or a crayon. It is not until I either ask her to focus or check for her understanding that Zara will get communicate her concerns. Although once she can conquer this, she transforms into a new person, her self-esteem boosting all the way up. Her demeanor changes completely, as she begins to show a smile and starts talking to the students around her. Zara’s critical thinking abilities are at the emerging stage, which is why I tend to check for her understanding often. She will most

likely sit in her chair until I approach her and either ask her if she has any questions or provide a bit more of one-on-one scaffolding.

Based on the data that has been collected, Zara is more successful when she is provided some form of guided practice and lessons are scaffolded and broken down in steps. She gets overwhelmed whenever one of her peers finishes right away and she is still working. She benefits from working in small groups that are created strategically based on the academic needs of each student. During small group instruction time, Zara feels less pressure to compete and can be shown in her body language as her shoulders become less tense and voluntarily participates and shares stories about what she did out on the playground and even asks questions on her own. This demonstrates that she can complete work effectively when extra scaffolds, such as modeling is provided prior to giving her any form of independent work after.

She performs average on formative and summative assessments and excels more on these tests the less emphasis that is placed on them. I usually remind Zara to try the best she can and not to worry about always getting the correct answer so that she does not feel overwhelmed and disillusioned. She can be a perfectionist with her work and if she cannot answer a question, it can be difficult for her to move on to the next one. She does have a longer thinking process, which means she benefits from questions and/or instructions repeated a second time and allowing her time to process information. Zara benefits when I provide prior knowledge whenever a new concept gets introduced. As for standardized tests, Zara performs a bit below average although, it is likely she will improve as the school year continues. When taking tests, she tends to look at the adult or teacher figure when she is unsure of how to answer a question or if he does not know the answer. I glance at her, give her a warm, and encourage her when it seems that she is at the point of giving up.

Zara completes all types of work, from math to English language arts, to science, to integrated art projects. She can sound out CVC words, understands the concept of addition, and is able to sound out letters to try and spell out words. However, there are times where Zara does not complete an activity because she runs out of time, which leads to some of her work being about halfway or a bit more than halfway complete. She does complete tasks as directed by her teachers and works very well independently. Zara feels completely comfortable working this way. She is often in her zone. As I look around the room, I can see her working diligently without a worry in the world, sometimes humming a song or talking to herself. I have noticed that she collaborates effectively with a partner and can communicate effectively with that student(s) when she wants to. She feels more intimidated when working with a larger group. There are occasions in which she goes off-topic from the lesson. This usually occurs when she is placed with a peer she feels more comfortable with. I can hear Zara sharing with a classmate about what she did over the weekend or sharing an opinion, either agreeing or disagreeing. The reason she might be comfortable in small groups and partner work because her partners are students who are in her class and sees them every day, unlike RTI. When Zara is completing academic work in class, she does so well until she is "wrong," gets an answer incorrect and either sees or verbally hears her other classmates get the same problem she got wrong, correct. Her confidence lessens a tad bit as she begins to slump into her chair. She tends to look at me for some form of reassurance that she is, in fact, capable to complete the task and overcome whatever obstacle she has in front of her. Zara needs reassurance, especially when she is near the point of possibly breaking down in tears and giving up. She is distracted easily, which leads to her taking a bit longer than some of her first-grade classmates in her class as I notice her either looking around the classroom or fidgeting with

whatever she has in front of her. I approach her and ask her if she has a question and she does not, I kindly redirect her back to the original activity.

Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity

Zara usually does not approach her peers. This occurs both inside and outside of the classroom unless she is approached. She tends to carry herself with much hesitance and caution.

Due to Zara needing some reassurance every now and then, she allows her partner (s) to take most of the lead when working as a group. She does contribute, but usually is not the one to lead even if she does not like her partner's ideas. I walk over to where she is and gradually bring Zara back into the conversation and say something along the lines of, "Hmm, well I do like that idea, let's ask Zara what she thinks." I know she has a lot to contribute so I try to bring her back. Sure enough, Zara slowly begins to share her own opinions.

Funds of Knowledge

Zara's family lives in a trailer park five minutes driving distance from school. During the home visit, both parents were at home, however I mainly spoke to her mother and towards the middle of the visit, her older sister also participated. I went over to Zara's home right after school and the overall tone was heart-warming, welcoming, with an open mind. I brought a variety of *pan dulce* over to the family and we ate an *elote*, or corn on the cob with mayonnaise, cheese and chili powder (optional). I noticed that in Zara's living room, she has a small castle tent where she tends to go and play or read. I can use this to inform my pedagogy with this student and/or the whole class by having a designated space in the room (or classroom) where students can go if they need a break or are feeling sad and just want to take some time to gather their thoughts and emotions. Her mom tells me that, "desde que se lo compraron, ya casi no sale de ahí" (Z. Garcia, personal communication, October 25, 2019) I

believe that having a designated area where students can go to and feel this sense of safety is something I would love to have in my classroom. Having this designated area communicates with students that it is normal to feel afraid, anxiety, or any other emotions and will not be reprimanded for the emotions they feel. This creates a safe classroom ecology, as students are being communicated that they are being valued not only as a student in the classroom but as a whole person. Zara's mom shared with me that the tips of her daughter's fingers have begun to peel due to a rare and non-threatening skin condition that also causes small bumps that when they flare up cause itchiness. I do not seem to recall the name of the condition and have yet to ask again. Although I am now aware of what my student might be feeling as soon as she walks in. This also helped inform my pedagogy because it makes me aware of other non-academic factors that can affect the learning of my students, in this case possibly writing slower and complete other tasks that involve the use of her hands at a slower pace than other classmates. It allows me to not make assumptions about my students and their academic levels, as well as their willingness to learn. This visit opened my eyes more in respect to the implicit biases I have at times that I am unaware of when it comes to my students' willingness to learn and the reasons behind their attention span.

Being attentive to my students is another observation I noticed during this home visit. Zara's parents and older sister are attentive to the needs of my student. They do this in a way that does not baby her but pushes and challenges her while also being a nurturing parent and communicating in different forms that she is valued. This informs my pedagogy both with Zara and the rest of my classroom by being attentive to the needs of my students in a way that challenges them rather than feeling sorry and not pushing them in school. Students are capable of more than what many give them credit for. I also noticed that Zara's mom corrected her

daughter's table manners every now and then when she would do things such as talk with her mouth open, washing her hands before eating, and putting her toys away after finishing playing. She would tell her daughter, "no hable con la boca abierta" (Z. Garcia, personal communication, October 25, 2019) every time she would speak with her mouth open. I did not mind this, but rather saw a side of Zara I rarely get to witness in an academic setting. This observation informed my pedagogy as I become more reflective about what I want my students to take with them at the end of the schoolyear. Being able to teach my students to be kind to others and willing to learn from one another

While being at her house, I was able to automatically witness the level of comfort Zara felt about being her complete self. She is a lot more talkative at home in comparison to school, which is something I am working on with her at school. Perhaps it is because she feels she can take her time and might feel the need to compare herself to students who finish faster than she does. One of my goals with Zara is to contribute towards building her self-esteem so she feels more comfortable sharing ideas in front of her peers. I am working on finding strategies that will boost her confidence. This has also allowed me to be more cognizant towards her sensitivity with her emotions, so wording phrases in a more positive note has been benefitting her, along with students who are still building their confidence and self-esteem. This home visit was eye-opening because I was able to observe my student in a setting where she feels completely comfortable in and plan on using different observations noticed from her home and embed them into my pedagogy.

Zara is an overall creative girl. She can use her imagination during exploration time when she builds with Magna tiles with her peers. Zara is also highly creative when working on writing assignments that include drawing a picture. She adds details, such as the ground, some form of

background, and uses an array of colors. She can take control of her emotions when she is frustrated by a task and can regain control of her emotions and figure out what can be done to solve the problem. She will begin to tear up quietly in her seat when she feels discouraged and feels she will not be able to finish like the rest of her peers. I approach her and ask her what the cause of her tears is. After explaining to me the incident, I ask her to take a few deep breaths as she regains focus and motivation to continue working. She is also a hard worker and puts in the effort in every assignment, whether that means she finishes or not. She is a timid girl who enjoys being in her comfort zone and unless assigned to work with other students, she will most likely either choose to work alone or with just one student.

Experiences, Interests, & Developmental Considerations

I can provide opportunities for Zara to learn self-awareness by inviting a student she has not played with yet during free-choice time. She usually enjoys building train tracks on the carpet and playing with trains. Although she does play with the train toys with another student, she does not necessarily play together with that student. Inviting Zara to play together with a few peers rather than independently is one way I can open the opportunity to develop her self-awareness. I would also like to ask her on a more consistent basis how she might be feeling when it may seem that a situation is frustrating her. I find that role playing might be an effective way to do this. I hardly ask her about her emotions, so I would be interested to hear what she has to say and eventually strive towards her being more conscious of how she feels and ideally be able to verbally communicate this without feeling embarrassed. This will allow Zara to develop her abilities on problem-solving, building up her self-esteem.

I can provide my student opportunities to develop her self-management skills more first and foremost through the development of her self-awareness. At this moment, Zara's self-

management skills are roughly about average for a first-grade student. She is aware and understands what is expected of her when instructions are given out to the class and can follow through independently for the most part. There are occasions in which she needs to be redirected, or the instructions to be worded differently. This is a way in which I can provide an opportunity for her to learn and build her self-management skills.

The way in which I can possibly provide an opportunity for Zara to continue to develop a growth mindset is by giving the feedback that highlights her trying different learning strategies at school. I can also continue to expose her to different instructional methods and strategies in order for her to visibly witness how she can possibly overcome diverse challenges herself as she watches me overcome them in the classroom. I would want Zara to continue developing her social awareness by posing questions and/or instructions and allowing an appropriate wait time after in order for her to process everything thoroughly. This, in turn, will eventually allow Zara to improve on her listening abilities, therefore improving her communication skills. I would also want to check up on her when a classmate is expressing emotions or communicating to her how he or she feels at that moment. Asking her probing questions based on the event and how she thinks the other student may be feeling is another method that can develop her social-awareness.

Developing Zara's relationship skills is an area I believe she can benefit from. The opportunities I can provide for her to develop her relationship skills would be by inviting her to cooperate with others when working in groups of two or another form of strategic grouping. Inviting her to help other peers she tends to rarely socialize with in class to put the toys away is another strategy that will foster her ability to make relationships with peers.

Based on the interview I had with my focus student Zara, she does not have a wide understanding of what her self-concept is. She is aware of basic information, such as her gender identity, age, and activities or games she enjoys. Based on our interview and what I know about Zara, she is aware that she is smart and "that I am nice," and at times unsure of her answers, as she responds with, "umm I don't know" (Z. Garcia, personal communication, September 27, 2019). I have been incorporating growth mindset conversations that are on how to find ways to solve the problem when faced with one or asking for help. She lets me know that when she grows up, she wants to be a "vet for animals" because "I take good care of my pets" (Z. Garcia, personal communication, September 27, 2019).

Based on what I know so far about my student at this point in time, her father leaving to Guatemala to take care of personal issues for roughly around eight months has extremely shaped who she is at this point in Zara's life. Zara's parents casually mention to me that prior to dad leaving for that long amount of time, she was typically not as shy and unsure of herself and her decisions as she is now. They also share with me that there are still occasions where Zara's father will leave to the store and she asks if he will come back; she feels he will not return. As her mother continues to retell this story and open up about her personal life and Zara, she is unable to control the tears that now begin to roll down from her eyes.

Based on the information and understanding I have about Zara; her parents seem to be the most influential figure. She enjoys being at school because she gets to "play with magna tiles because they can build whatever" (Z. Garcia, personal communication, September 27, 2019). She also likes to "play with trains" (Z. Garcia, personal communication, September 27, 2019) during exploration time with a specific peer.

Zara is the most successful when she is given space to work independently or with one more person. It seems beneficial this way because she can work together and collaborate. She is the least successful when an activity is timed or is explicitly told she has x amount of time to work on an activity or assignment. She tends to panic almost every time and focuses on what she has not finished, rather than the progress she is making.

Based on our interview and what I know and understand about Zara, her linguistic area has influenced her attitude towards school because she enjoys working on spelling and writing less than other areas, such as math. She is learning Spanish and English at the same time and has some challenges sounding out letters, as Spanish is the dominant language she hears at home. She is the most comfortable when she is either out on the playground or during free choice in class. This is where Zara can really use her imagination and requires no real structure nor academic work. She is not forced to work with peers if she does not want to and can choose whom to play with. Zara feels less comfortable whenever a task is timed or whenever a task requires a lot of reading. She also is the least comfortable when a situation arises in which she must work with other first grade students she is unfamiliar with, as she is very shy.

Zara's support network both in and outside of school are her parents. Based on her age and grade level she is in; her development is typical. The only aspect that may seem to be atypical is when she believes Dad will not come back when he runs an errand, such as going to the store. However, knowing the context behind this behavior makes sense and is rational. Reasoning behind her behavior has been explained previously.

For this interview analysis, I observed daily in and outside the classroom every day. I constantly communicate with her parents during drop off and pick up after school. I also used the interview voice recordings that were conducted- (1) at school and (2) during the home visit

with consent from her father and family. The only technologies Zara uses at school is the iPad, the projector, as well as the document camera for modeling and guided practice.

Case Study 2: Kairo

Kairo² is an amazing soul. There is not a day he ceases to impress me with all that he does. During instruction time, I worry whether he will be able to complete the task his classmates are working on. Sure enough, I see Kairo from across the classroom either sitting down in his chair or standing, working diligently without any worries as he interacts with his friends who sit right across from him. Kairo is of course, a popular student in our class and in the entire school.

Kairo is Caucasian and comes from an upper middle-class White family. His mother is a nurse for Kaiser and his father works in law enforcement and has an older sister who is currently in the second grade. Kairo has blonde hair and light blue ocean eyes. He was born with TAR syndrome (thrombocytopenia-absent radius) with no radius bones in both of his arms. His arms have shortened humerus bones, small elbow joints, and five fingers near his elbow joints. His thumbs are also inwardly rotated and has arthrogryposis. This means Kairo gets severe joint contractures and has low platelet levels that can cause poor blood clotting with excessive bleeding. He bruises easily because of this, including petechiae (bleeding under the skin). This is the first time that I have had the opportunity to work with a student who has an orthopedic impairment or any health impairment for that matter, which is why I am eager to learn more about his impairment and more about him as a person. I would like to have a greater understanding about him and his health impairments so that I can assist him better in and outside of school, which is why I chose Kairo as one of my focus students. I also want to figure out different ways to differentiate for him and work collaboratively alongside his other teachers such as Language and Speech (LAS), Occupational Therapy (OT), Adapted Physical Education

(APE) who already know him so that I can assist him efficiently in class and be a part of his empowerment network he has.

Kairo uses prosthetic legs or as he likes to call them, *robot legs*, for most of the time he is at school. There are occasions in which he has a difficult time balancing his upper body when standing because his knees were amputated when he was a baby. He is also unable to bend with his robot legs, so there have been occasions where he falls to the floor on his chin or his bottom. He astonishes me as to how he simply uses his body to turn over and ask someone to help him up. He does not cry nor does he fuss about this. Rather, he interacts with his regular peers in class and always tries to keep up with them. Kairo does not view his impairment as an obstacle that impedes him from doing the things he enjoys but just views himself as just another six-year-old kid who enjoys playing Beyblades with his classmates.

Academic Standing

As of this moment in the school year, his area for growth is writing sentences legibly. Currently, Kairo can write one sentence, sometimes two. His sentences are not that legible when he uses a pencil either. I have been allowing Kairo to use a felt pen every now and then during activities that involve writing to figure out if that works better for him than a pencil. So far, this has been a better tool for Kairo to use so my mentor teacher and I decided to place markers in his pencil box so that he can produce legible writing. One of his IEP goals was to be able to legibly write up to three sentences with age-appropriate line orientation in two out of the five attempts by November 29, 2019. Due to Kairo's health impairments, he has opted out of the CAASPP, SBAC, and any other forms of testing. He is very well able to work in groups and independently. When doing so, he needs certain modifications, such as asking a peer or one of his teachers with assistance in setting up needed materials for that specific task, such as opening his supplies box

and fixing his chair as close to the table as possible so that he is able to reach his materials. Kairo is friendly to all his classmates and gets along with everyone. He does get a bit distracted when working independently and wants to talk to peers who are around him. Kairo completes work that involves writing one to two sentences, snip snip art (art that involves snipping paper to create an art piece with scissors and glue only), guided drawing, coloring in pictures, sounding out sounds, reading books that contain sight words we currently are learning in class, and drawing pictures that begin with the letter of the week. He can complete work as directed by his teachers. He usually needs a second reminder because he gets easily distracted by one of his peers because he enjoys social interactions. Once he is aware of the instructions for the task he is to complete, he completes it the best he can without any behavior issues, such as tantrums or refusal.

Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity

Kairo is a creative person. He enjoys using his imagination during story time and creates sounds when playing with cars, planes, puppets, and any other toy he enjoys during free choice. He loves music and dancing in the classroom with his classmates. Kairo's critical thinking skills is a bit above grade level. He can make deep connections with a task we work on with the overall theme for the week. Kairo is also able to add on to probing questions when asked to the entire class and can stay on task when having a conversation. His communication skills are above grade level. He can verbally communicate with everyone in class. Kairo does have a difficult time asking someone for assistance because he likes to do things on his own if left to do so. He struggles with making self-connections with a text and identifying how a character's adventures/experiences are either similar or different. He struggles with these academic standards because we are still beginning to cover these academic standards in class. Kairo can

answer questions about key details in a story, knows what an author and illustrator's job is, can name characters of a story, can ask questions about words he does not know in a story, can distinguish when a story is non-fiction or fiction/fantasy, can use the pictures to make a prediction, can follow words in a text from left to right and top to bottom. He can also hear words and asks questions about key details in a text. In math, he can put objects from smallest to largest in the correct order, is able to identify how many objects are in a set, can count out a smaller number of objects correctly from a larger amount. He can count over ten if asked and can even recite his numbers up to one hundred. Kairo is a fun boy to be around. He is extremely social and is unafraid to speak his mind. He always appears to carry a smile on his face and is enjoyed by teachers and peers at school. When he walks into the room, he proceeds to hug his classmates, unless his classmates approach him first in a big circle full of hugs. He asks his friends to play with him, or his friends follow him to play what he is playing. Kairo is funny and a fun person to be around and has particularly good social skills. He listens and follows directions for the most part. On occasions, he will decide to try to do his own thing, such as laying down on the carpet, talking to his peers during story time, or try to use a different color crayon than the one asked to use during a task but with a small redirecting will refocus again.

Funds of Knowledge

I conducted a home visit for Kairo. When I went to his home, his family was very welcoming and open to the idea of me visiting. In the beginning, it was a bit difficult to get comfortable in the home of my student's parents. It seems that although I had already conducted a home visit and may have had an idea of what it would be like, every home and family is different than the other. I brought the family some muffins and they were very appreciative of the gesture (I ended up finding out they like *pan dulce*, as they often go on vacation to México). After this and a few

questions that were asked, the family felt more comfortable with me being in their home. During the visit, Kairo's mom, dad, and older sister were present. The overall tone of it was very empowering, casual, and a bit emotional throughout different parts of the visit. Kairo's mother spoke to me for most of the time I was there. Something that caught my attention right away was that his mom treats him as equal as any other person in the room and holds the same expectations as anyone else. Although he has an impairment, his family treats him just the same as his older sister and the same as everyone else for that matter. His mom mentions to me that during their recent visit to the store, a lady noticed Kairo using his prosthetics and in her opinion was overly praising him, saying things such as, "Oh my goodness you are so special" and "You are so brave" when his older sister turns around wondering who she is talking about and blurts out, "Who?" (Personal communications, November 15, 2019). In other words, his family does not view his disability on the negative side nor as their son being more special than others. This informs the use of my pedagogy so that I can continue working on holding the same expectations for Kairo as everyone else in the class.

Kairo's parents also have taught him mannerisms and not being rude or disrespectful to others. I noticed this when his mom redirected him when she tried to grab his attention. She had a conversation with him about not ignoring others when they are talking. This is useful for my pedagogy by continuously teaching my students how to listen and follow instructions. In the primary years, it is important for students to learn how to follow instructions and how to listen carefully of what is being asked and staying on topic. During this home visit, I also noticed that Kairo's parents have been inculcating in him to be humbler. His mother reveals to me that whenever they are out in public, people never fail to praise him for having an orthopedic impairment and receives a lot of positive attention. However, his mom communicates with me

that this has led to her son lacking in humility and enjoys getting all the attention he can possibly get. “He needs to be more humble,” (Personal communications, November 15, 2019) his mom tells me. This has informed my pedagogy as it allows myself to reflect upon what I want students to leave away with once the schoolyear is over. It also has informed me that Kairo benefits from the conversations we have as a class about kindness, sharing, and being respectful to the person who is talking by listening and making eye contact.

I have noticed that Kairo has a big imagination when playing with toys. He can play with any toy he finds. I can use this to inform my pedagogy as this constantly reminds me that students also need time throughout the school day to free play. Although the majority want students to work on academics in the classroom, they tend to forget that kids also need to be kids and not stress so much because of tests. Allowing students, a given time every day to have the opportunity to play allows them to release their energy, interact with other students, and ultimately play without a structure similar to P.E. I also noticed that Kairo’s parents also do not feel pity, sorry, nor do they “baby” him simply because of his impairment. They believe that doing so does him a disservice. If he falls, Kairo’s mom tells him to try to get up on his own first and communicates with him that if he gets hurt, he is still able to do the same tasks that everyone else can do. Kairo’s parents want him to try to find a solution first and if he cannot find one after trying on his own, that is when his parents or his sister will help him. This informs the use of my pedagogy by teaching my students problem-solving skills so that they do not stay nor become a dependent student. This is crucial because teaching students problem-solving skills allows them to become more independent and confident with making mistakes. Tomlinson (2017) describes in *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms* the four stages of how independence develops in a student based on being skill building, structured independence,

shared independence, and self-guided independence. This allows myself to be more cognizant as a novice teacher when I assign students different tasks or student jobs throughout the year (p.89)

Action Plan

One way I can provide Kairo opportunities to develop his self-awareness is by inviting him to play with a student he has not recently played with during free choice. This would be a great way because it is not structured, which is less stressful for some students and allows Kairo to still play and use his imagination. Many times, Kairo plays with the same students during free choice so it would be interesting to see how he would interact with someone different. Kairo is very capable of managing his emotions, whether that means he is sad, frustrated, or extremely excited about something. There are occasions in which he does not get his first choice for a toy, a center, or being able to go with the kindergarten class to the library (he has A.P.E. at that time) and still cooperates without any form of a tantrum or crying. He may not be fond of an idea but still complies. Kairo is a very mature person for his age and is already developing a growth mindset. One way I can provide an opportunity for him to continue developing a growth mindset is using read alouds. Kairo really enjoys story time because he likes to use his imagination at this time. This is a great way for him to do this and learn through books that have a growth mindset or similar themes embedded in them. Opening the space to conversations after these read alouds is a way to go deeper into developing a growth mindset for Kairo. One way I can provide opportunities for Kairo to continue his development on his social-awareness is by asking Kairo how he thinks a student might be feeling when someone says something nice to them or something that hurts their feelings in the classroom. I would ask him probing questions and dig deeper so he can understand how words can either hurt or heal. As mentioned throughout this

analysis, Kairo is a friendly boy and person overall. He gets along with everyone in class and is well-known at his school. He does not struggle with making and maintaining relationships. Kairo is a good friend. He asks his peers to play with him, is willing to play what they want to play, can take turns with a preferred toy at that moment, and verbally communicates when he needs help. Kairo also verbally communicates with his peers what he likes and dislikes. He can also interact with his peers without arguing.

Kairo views himself as a nice person. He is confident in the things he does and the decisions he makes daily. “I am brave because I look brave,” and “nice because I play with [everyone],” says Kairo during our interview (K. Washington, personal communication, October 25, 2019). He is anything but timid. He enjoys being around his friends and is extraordinarily strong mentally, physically, and academically. Kairo is a person with lots of perseverance and determination. I have been assisting Kairo with bringing his adaptive materials to his table along with the daily materials we use in class, such as his pencil box and opening it for him in order to create an inclusive environment that affirms his self-concept. In addition, there is a provided boxed chair for him to sit in if he wants to either sit there, on the carpet, or stand during group time activities. The boxed chair has arm rests on both sides because it helps Kairo balance his body so that he does not slide and fall off since his arms are at about elbow length. Kairo tells me “one time I went to NASA in Houston” (K. Washington, personal communication, October 25, 2019). He goes on to tell me that he met an astronaut and saw space toys with his family. This has influenced him to become an astronaut. Kairo says, “I want to be an astronaut because I wanna see the moon and give back my sister a moon rock” (K. Washington, personal communication, October 25, 2019). The most influential person in Kairo’s life is his dad. He goes on to tell me that he wants to be just like his dad when he grows up because, “ he catches

the bad guys and gets flies in a helicopter” (K. Washington, personal communication, October 25, 2019). Kairo enjoys school a lot. He gets to play with his friends during free choice time and talk to them in class. He does not view school as an impossible obstacle but rather overcomes anything he puts his mind to. He also loves playing with his friends out at recess. Kairo is the least successful during regular P.E. and needs adaptations. He goes to adapted P.E. twice a week for thirty minutes each time. He is the most successful when he is working around his peers, whether it is independently or in small groups. Kairo really benefits from modeling or guided tasks. Kairo’s health impairments have influenced him to become more determined to prove others that he can do regular tasks that others can do. This has also influenced his dream of becoming an astronaut. Based on our interview, Kairo also tell me that another reason why he wants to be an astronaut is because “I want to be the first astronaut with no legs” (K. Washington, personal communication, October 25, 2019). For the most part, Kairo feels completely comfortable anywhere at school. All of his peers and teachers at school are friendly and everyone knows who he is. His support network at school are myself, my mentor teacher, his orthopedic therapist, educational specialist teachers, the school nurse, the school psychologist, his aunt who is a special education teacher, and the principal and assistant principal. His support network outside of school are his parents, his aunt, and his older sister who is in the second grade. Kairo demonstrates typical behavior for a six-year-old child. He plays with his friends, interacts with them in developmentally appropriate ways. Kairo plays with all the toys in class, such as trains, building with Legos, Beyblades with his peers, cars, and puppets. He verbally communicates what he likes and dislikes or when he needs assistance with a task. The data that I used for this analysis was my student’s IEP for this schoolyear, our student interview, and the work he completes in class. Kairo’s assistive technologies include an adapted

mounted scissors, squeezable scissors, a boxed chair, a slanted, mounted clipboard during any writing and/or drawing task as needed by my student, and two different sets of prosthetic legs, one for morning recess and one for the rest of the day for walking and balancing his body more efficiently.

Case Study 3: Penelope

Every morning she walks into class, she gives me a big hug. Whenever I hug her, I wish I could let her future self know that she is brave and that everything will work out, but I hold it all in as usual. She has now begun to ask when I plan on going to her house again as she looks at me with eagerness while she puts her snack in her cubby. Penelope³ ensures to get right to work as soon as she walks in. She grabs her pencil box, grabs a piece of paper from the kidney bean-shaped table and finds a seat at the long tables. She means business. Penelope does not allow anyone nor anything to fully distract her from completing her work. Ever. From afar, I can see her talking to one of her peers. She intrigues me because while it seems that she is enjoying sitting next to a friend, her facial expressions hardly ever change. She carries herself mysteriously and rarely mentions her family and hobbies she enjoys, which is why she caught my attention from the beginning.

Penelope is biracial. Her mother is African American, and her father is Mexican American. When she was four years old, her mother passed away from cancer and has left her father in an unbearable pain that he tries to hide when he drops her off on Monday mornings. Penelope can be quite timid if she is surrounded by people she does not know. I have come to realize that she turns into this timid girl whenever she is in an unfamiliar space. At first, I could not exactly pinpoint what it was that made her timid and finally came to the conclusion that she is not a fan of unfamiliarity the day she went to the library just with our first

grade class as a kindergartener (kindergarten goes on an entire different day and time of the week). She tends to stay very close to adults she is familiar with, especially if she does not feel completely comfortable being around an unknown space. She is mature for a five-year-old and has a soft, quiet voice. Penelope is helpful when it comes to assisting her classmates if/when they need help. She gets along with all the students in our class. Although, it seems that some of the girls in the class feel intimidated by her competitive side. Even if assignments and activities are untimed and fun, she will always find a way to turn it into a competition and be the first one to finish. She speaks fluent English and understands some Spanish when it is spoken to her, but usually will respond back in English because the only person in her household to speak to her in Spanish is her father.

Academic Standing

Penelope performs average and a bit above average on formative, summative, and standardized tests. We have not done many standardized testing in kindergarten as of this moment in the school year. She knows the majority of her letters and sounds of the alphabet. Her area for growth can be that she needs to participate more in class during whole-group activities. She could also benefit from using her words to communicate with other students and teachers more often, both in and out of the classroom. Penelope is more than capable and able to work independently. She can listen carefully to instructions and work with little to hardly any redirecting. Penelope is also able to work in groups and can work efficiently with students she gets along with better. These usually are students who rarely need repetition of instructions and are developmentally able to remain on task. Penelope usually has a challenge working in groups if her partners have a difficult time cooperating or working together, sharing, and have a difficult time communicating verbally. She is someone who prefers to get to work right away and

waste as less time as possible when it comes to working on an activity or assignment. Penelope completes every assignment or task that we work on in class. She completes reading assignments, guided practice on book journals and drawings. In math, she can count numbers up to twenty, tally up groups of five, as well as handwriting uppercase and lowercase letters. However, her need to finish first results in her rushing through her work and is shown when looking over at all the students' work. From her name to the very last word she writes is usually in big sort of sloppy letters. Initially, I thought this was always the way she wrote until one day at school, I asked her if she could rewrite her name. Her handwriting there was smaller and neater. Both her grandmother and her father shared with me at different moments in time that she tends to rush through writing and coloring and are working with her so that she takes her time in these two areas.

Penelope always completes tasks as directed. She can listen carefully to the given instructions that are given out and knows what is expected when finished with a specific task. Despite her rushing through writing and coloring, she is a creative girl. During free choice, I see her acting out situations, drawing on different pieces of printing paper with markers and using scissors. She uses her imagination whenever she draws her pictures and is able to give a thorough explanation of what her work consists of if I ask her. For Penelope, everything she does has a significance behind it. If she is cutting up pieces up paper into scraps and gluing them onto another blank sheet, she is making it to give it to one of her friends as a way to demonstrate her loyalty and importance of that friendship towards that student. She usually gravitates towards the same game during free-choice time, which is playing teacher. She enjoys being the person in charge and taking action. She stands in front of the whiteboard and with a pointer, points to the

date, the month, and pretends to ask the class who is buying a school lunch. She then asks for me to participate and be one of her students, so I sit on the carpet too.

Based on my student's interview and my knowledge about Penelope, she can think critically and is capable of using clues to solve a problem. Penelope can also make connections in regard to lessons and activities that are done in school. Her critical thinking is roughly around the developing stage and her communication levels are between emerging and developing. While she certainly has opinions and her own ideas, she does not verbally communicate concerns, thoughts, and ideas consistently. Based on my understanding of Penelope, she somewhat struggles when it comes to socializing and verbally communicating with the majority of her classmates. She seems to struggle with this because she is a timid girl who enjoys having a couple of friends in her circle. Penelope also is struggling with writing short sentences because our class is continuously learning about how to write sentences and sounding out letters to form words. It is likely that over time, she will be able to sound out more letters and form words in a sentence. The data I have collected suggest that Penelope is a very quick learner because she is usually able to grasp concepts the first time they become introduced. The work she completes and turns in demonstrates that Penelope knows her numbers. She is almost able to count to one hundred by ones. She can write her numbers from zero to ten as of this moment. She is also able to count to tell the number of objects, as well as comparing numbers and identify which number is the greatest. Penelope is also at the beginning stage of identifying the various story elements of a book as we discuss this during story time in class.

Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity

Penelope has many strengths. She has a nurturing personality that usually is seen when a student sitting near her is struggling with grasping and following instructions during some sort of

assignment. She is mature for a five-year-old and in a way, is an older lady stuck inside a five-year-old's body. During instruction time, I see her assisting one of her classmates by reminding them to stay on-task or reminding them to write their name at the top of their paper. It seems to me that Penelope can benefit from interacting more with peers who are her age, both inside and outside of the classroom and school. She is the only child and based on our recent interview, the majority of her cousins live around the Los Angeles area. Her household consists of adults, so she does not always have the opportunity to interact with other children her age. She is a strong and brave girl, one who tries to figure out a solution to whatever obstacle she may have at that given moment before asking for any help.

Funds of Knowledge

I also visited the home of Penelope. She was very excited for me to visit her. As soon as I rang the doorbell and her dad answered the door, she ran to give me a big hug. Penelope lives in a single-family house with her dad. During the home visit, both my focus student and her dad were present. I brought the family a box of *conchas*, a kind of *pan dulce*, or sweet bread. Her dad was very appreciative of the gesture and we discussed many different topics in the living room. During my time there, my student showed me around her room. She showed me her desk, her toys, her castle-bed, all her favorite stuffed animals, and her family pictures that included her mom from a few years back. Penelope did not hesitate to show me her dance moves and all the different kinds of hair ties, bows and hair products she has. The overall tone of the visit was very welcoming and open to the idea of a home visit. I did sense a bit of discomfort in the beginning with Penelope's dad however, the conversations just began to flow as topics led to new questions. Penelope's dad also began to feel more comfortable when I showed him pictures of me with students whom I worked with from the last schoolyear. This whole action

of humanizing myself at the home of my student's parent was beneficial because he felt more comfortable being himself and was able to open up more on topics that Dad may have decided not to answer or answered briefly.

While I was at Penelope's house, I noticed that her house was very clean, and her home was filled with different canvases that had positive quotes based on family, love, and kindness. This stood out to me because it communicated a welcoming environment that is also able to do the same with my focus student. This speaks to me that my focus student needs more love and kindness and other emotional supports both in and outside of school. This informs my pedagogy so that I can pay more attention to her in the area(s) I believe she would really benefit from more. It also allows me to self-reflect and always remind myself that students are not successful if they are simply taught how to succeed in tests and academics. On the contrary, students are more successful individuals if they are taught kindness, sharing, and loving others. *In Highly Effective Teachers of Vulnerable Students: Practice Transcending Theory*, Poplin and Bermúdez (2019) interviewed and observed 42 teachers and asked them what makes them an effective teacher. Mrs. K, a middle school teacher said that it is important to "look beyond the test scores, and [find] out who these students really are" (p. 20). This is especially crucial because it informs my pedagogy by constantly reminding me to balance both the academics in class along with social-emotional learning and that both are interwoven together. I also noticed that my focus student and her dad spend family time together. "We have McDonald's Friday if she behaves all week," says Penelope's dad (Personal communications, November 14, 2019). My focus student does not hesitate to let me know that "We have dance battles with my friend named Ms. Rhonda" (Personal communications, November 14, 2019). I can use this information to inform my pedagogy by creating memorable experiences that can be tied to different unit themes

or creating daily fun activities that are integrated with instruction. Penelope's dad also mentioned to me about wanting his daughter to grow up speaking both English and Spanish because she is biracial. He empowers her in a way so that she does not feel that she does not belong anywhere. He lets me know that he has these conversations with her so that no one tries to make her feel any less. This I can use to inform my pedagogy by continuing to create and maintain a safe and welcoming classroom culture for all my students. Many classrooms lack that sense of belonging and I want to ensure that this does not occur in my classroom. As Hammond (2015) mentions in her book, I want my classroom to consist of a culture of caring. "The most powerful thing we can do to create a culture of caring is to allow ourselves to be seen as human beings, not just in our role as teachers..." There is considerable evidence that teachers, leaders, and other authority figures who disclose part of their authentic selves to students or employees build not only trust but generate greater cooperation and teamwork within a group as well" (p. 80). During the home visit, I noticed that Penelope was very helpful when it came to getting chores done around the house or even being a good host by bringing some water and/or food. I can use this to inform my pedagogy by allowing students to have jobs in the classroom for them to learn responsibilities and what that is like. Penelope's dad also revealed to me that he is raising his daughter to be respectful towards others and that it is okay if you are not first all the time. This can be used to inform my pedagogy because it reminds me of the sorts of manners I want my students to have by the end of the schoolyear, such as keeping hands to one's self, being a kind friend, using words like "please" or "no thank you," etcetera.

The home visits that were conducted were all unique, providing me with knowledge most likely I would not have been able to get within the realm of my classroom. I was given the opportunity to observe my students in their complete comfort zones, which informed me of ideas

and practices I can use and incorporate more so that my focus students and all students become more engaged and feel they are in a safe environment.

Experiences, Interests, & Developmental Considerations

Based on our interview and my interactions with Penelope, she is aware that she is smart and capable of accomplishing whatever she puts her mind to. She is a confident young person, who believes in herself. Penelope exhibits some shy behavior and when uses her voice, it is typically very low. As of this moment, this is the only information that I have regarding her self-concept. In my classroom, I am creating an inclusive environment that affirms her self-concept by having morning meeting daily. This allows every student, including Penelope, to share with the class. During morning meeting, students are given a question to answer. For example, the morning meeting question can be about stating your name and what your favorite food is. A brief conversation is held before beginning morning meeting to review expectations and what it means to be respectful when it is someone else's turn to share. These sorts of conversations can continue to occur in the classroom to create an inclusive environment that affirms Penelope's self-concept. Penelope enjoys playing teacher during free-choice time at school. She loves pretending she is the teacher and using the pointer and point to the whiteboard, say the date, and spell out the month up on the whiteboard. Penelope wants to be a veterinarian when she grows up because, "I really wanted a pet" and "they see animals are okay and stuff" (P. Venegas, personal communication, October 4, 2019). Penelope's mother passed away last year due to cancer. This has influenced Penelope's life in a way where she is a very independent young girl who is unafraid to face any obstacle. The passing away of her mother has led Penelope to live in two households. While Dad is at work, she goes to her grandparents' house and gets picked up to go home with her dad once he is off. Penelope is always around adults at

home, so her level of maturity is higher than most five-year-olds. When she feels frustrated by a specific situation, she does not allow that to control her actions. Instead, she has conversations about the situation with her father, aunt, and grandmother. Penelope also tries to find a solution for any problem she might have at school; she is quite the problem-solver. Both her grandmother and her father have been extremely influential figures in her life. They both take care of Penelope and ensure that she is being loved and cared for. Penelope really enjoys being at school. She loves interacting with both of her teachers and with her classmates. One of Penelope's favorite things to do at school is to do "snip snip art because you get to cut" and "play teacher" because "I get to send them to the principal's office when they make bad choices" (P. Venegas, personal communication, October 4, 2019). She is the most successful in almost any part of the day, from morning meeting to center time, to recess. She feels comfortable in school, both in and outside the classroom. Penelope does not feel comfortable being around students who she is unfamiliar with or around students she usually does not socialize or play with daily. For example, she might feel a bit less comfortable being around a different kindergarten class if she does not know any of the students or usually does not socialize with them. This is where she is most likely to exhibit a shy and uncomfortable behavior. Penelope has a diverse cultural background however; this has not been a main reason that has shaped her attitude toward school and the future. At school, Penelope is the most comfortable during free-choice time. During this time, students are free to choose what they want to play, and Penelope's favorite thing to play is teacher and "sometimes I like to play computer" (P. Venegas, personal communication, October 4, 2019). She gets to role play and can be the teacher. She pretends to teach her own students and point to the whiteboard with a pointer. Her support network in and outside of school consists of her father, her grandparents, her aunt and uncle. Our school is also

Penelope's support network, including her teachers. Penelope's behavior demonstrates that her development and behavior is typical for a five-year old. She constantly interacts with her peers and is aware of what makes her comfortable and uncomfortable. She is able to complete assignments and tasks as directed. For this interview analysis, I used a voice interview, as well as my knowledge and understanding of my student in school. I also maintain weekly communication with Penelope's grandmother on how her granddaughter is doing and what she is learning each week.

Action Plan

I can provide opportunities for Penelope to have more self-awareness during free-choice time because this is the time where students feel less pressure and can just play without having a strict structure. This is a great way to provide my student the opportunity to become more self-aware because she will be able to develop socially and emotionally. When Penelope plays teacher, she usually is surrounded by a few other girls who also enjoy playing teacher near the whiteboard with whiteboard markers and spelling out the month of the year we are currently in. Despite being surrounded by a few girls who also play teacher, she hardly interacts with them and stays in her bubble. Penelope is mature, despite her being in kindergarten. As of this moment in time, she has strong self-management skills. She can control her emotions when she is feeling frustrated by a situation or is frustrated by one of her peers. How I can continue to develop Penelope's self-management is by asking her how her day is going and praise her and have a brief conversation about how she was able to solve a situation that I know was difficult for her to overcome. One way in which I can also provide opportunities for Penelope to continue to develop a growth mindset is by having constant conversations with the entire class about situations, such as sounding out letters the best they can rather than focusing on spelling every

word perfectly. Another example of these conversations can include taking turns and not crying or throwing some form of a tantrum if a student is not picked for an activity. Consistently reminding students that maybe they will get chosen the next time around is another method for Penelope to continue developing a growth mindset. Based on my knowledge about Penelope, I can provide an opportunity for her to build her social awareness skills throughout the day in the middle of a lesson and asking students, in particular Penelope, how she thinks a person may feel if x situation occurred and asking a probing question after that. I would then address that situation-hypothetical or real-to the entire class. This same method can also be done during recess when/if Penelope does something that hurts another student's feelings and assisting with that situation. This way, she will be aware how she made another student feel with her actions. As mentioned prior, Penelope gravitates more on the timid side when placed in an unfamiliar setting. She is specific as to who she includes in her circle of friends to interact with. The way I can provide an opportunity for her to continue to grow her relationship skills by inviting her and other students to play together during recess time and observing how they interact with one another. I would also ask her sometime during or after recess how the interaction went with those students and building off on that conversation.

Concluding Thoughts on Case Studies

These case studies were all done with consent from parents and/or guardians as well as my students. The idea of conducting home visits terrified me, especially as a first-year teacher. As I reflect on these experiences, I am glad I visited my students. It allowed me to see my students outside of school and in a space where they felt the most comfortable being themselves. Additionally, it gave me the opportunity to view my students and their parent(s) as regular individuals who have hobbies and interests outside of school. In regards to data, I plan to collect

data on a weekly basis for the entire class that will be based on four different areas. This will allow me to reflect upon how each one of my focus students is performing and the progress they will be making over the course of this schoolyear. It will additionally allow me to continue informally assessing my students so that I can readjust my lesson plans wherever needed. In the end, having gone through the process of conducting a case studies of my three students brought us all much closer. I felt as though my students had gained greater trust in me and felt safer in our classroom. For that, it was all worthwhile.

Part C: My Community, School, and Classroom

Section 1- Community Context

Demographics

Located in a quiet, suburban type of setting lies the school that I currently serve. As I begin to arrive on my morning drives to school, the first view I always notice are the clear, blue mountains that fill up with snow during the winter. I feel a sense of tranquility every time I see them. The weather here is usually fresh during the fall and wintertime but also quite hot during the summer. This city resembles a mixture of a desert-like suburban-city surrounded by tall, flourishing trees. It has a feeling of maturity as it seems to be a place where residents settle down and care for their family or are beginning to build one. It is not a party setting whatsoever; people do not come to this city to party. On the contrary, it is primarily a residential city, where most of its commercial activity occurs in what is known as “The Village.” “The Village” is comprised of an array of small store-front restaurants, boutiques, art galleries, and offices. It always has a “clean” look, especially with streets being free of trash. The asphalt on the streets are smooth, some more than others, depending on the main streets traveled on. Its houses are all tidy with their freshly-cut green grass and aesthetically-pleasing well-maintained homes. The

majority of residents here are professionals who work at one of the nearby colleges or work from home. Alexander City seems to be a place where the typical middle-class American family would want to live in. People seem friendly, however if someone looks like he or she does not belong in this community (for whatever reason), suspicion is more than likely to occur. Why is does this occur? Like Sensoy and DiAngelo explain thoroughly, it is tied to the way in which a person has been socialized through what is known as socialization. “Socialization is the process of learning the meanings and practices that enable us to make sense of and behave appropriately in that culture. ... we just *know* when someone if “friendly,” or is “acting weird,” or has “poor hygiene.” We know because we have been socialized into the norms of our culture, norms that regulate these aspects of social life...” (Sensoy, Ö. & DiAngelo R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal?*). This is the reason why this feeling of suspicion occurs when a person *looks* like they do not belong within the community I currently serve. Despite this fact, Alexander City still seems to be a place where the typical American family wants to reside in.

Within Alexander City is the school I currently serve. The demographics of this community consists of 55 percent of students being Hispanic, 31 percent White, 5 percent identifying as more than one race, 5 percent of students are Black, 4 percent of students are Asian, 1 percent identify as Filipino, and less than 1 percent of students are American Indian/Alaska Native. In addition, 9 percent of students at Wilson Elementary School are English language learners and 50 percent are considered to be from low-income families (Great Schools (2020). Student Demographics.). Yet, there is a discrepancy when it comes to the demographics of who actually resides here. According to City Data, 49.2 percent of the population is White, 26.5 percent are Hispanic, 13.9 percent Asian, 5.2 percent are Black, 4 percent are more than one race, less than 1 percent are American Indian, and less than 1 percent are another race (City-Data

(2017). Races in [Alexander City], CA, 2017.). The median household income in 2017 was roughly around \$103,000 and 8.5 percent in 2017 of residents considered to be living in poverty. In Alexander City, the dominant language that is spoken is no other than English. The irony is that long ago, the city's first population to have ever resided in the community were different indigenous groups, specifically the Serrano and Tongva people. Prior to White and Spanish settlers, the Serrano and Tongva people had named Alexander City Torojoatngna; "the place below Joat, "Joat" being what many today know it as Mt. Baldy, or snowy mountain (Pomona College (2020). 1884 and Before: [Alexander City].) Spanish is spoken here but it is not the dominant language, nor is it a language that is spoken liberally by everyone in the community. As an educator who is person of color, I myself have even felt some hesitance to use my native language in the beginning. I can only imagine how Native Spanish-speaking families must feel when they speak in Spanish or choose not to on purpose. This, I seem to always grapple with. Bettina Love does a wonderful job questioning this problem as well when she was a new teacher in Florida working in a low-income community with students of color. "...it just served as another reminder that their darkness and language were not valued in a country that may require the completion of a Spanish-speaking class to graduate from high school but condemns you for speaking Spanish as your first language" (Love, B. (2019). *We Want to Do More Than Survive*).

Looking back into history, the city's first population to have ever resided in the community were different tribal communities, specifically the Serrano and Tongva people. Prior to White and Spanish settlers, the Serrano and Tongva people had named this city Torojoatngna, "the place below Joat," Joat being what many today know it as Mt. Baldy, or snowy mountain (Pomona College (2020). 1884 and Before: [Alexander City].). The next group of people to settle in Alexander City were the Spanish and Mexicans between 1540 up until after the Mexican-

American war between 1846-1848. It is more than evident the languages that were spoken decades ago did not include English until White settlers came to the city.

Housing & Resources

In this predominantly-White middle-class community, the type of housing that can be found are single-family homes, apartment complexes, and condominiums nearby. There are also mobile homes at the community's mobile home park just down the street from school. One of my students lives in one of these mobile homes. Based on my knowledge of the community of this city, residents have access to their local library, where families and college students alike often go to check out books or work on homework. There are also a couple of public parks that are available within this community. Additionally, residents can go to the nearby college campuses that are walking distance. Schools and families also have access to the well-known botanical gardens and explore the beautiful plants, flowers, and attend fun and exciting events, such as Wine Safari in March, Spring Free Day, and volunteer information sessions. Alexander City also has their local community club that is located on 19 acres and serves as a world-class gym, fitness, and wellness center. Here, residents and non-residents of this community can take part in yoga and Pilates, swimming, and so many more perks, with a membership of course.

The majority of residents in this city are middle-class, upper-middle class, and even high class; this means that the majority of resources that are at the fingertips of residents in the community are not necessarily free. It also means that it is only at the fingertips of those who fit into specific categories. Why is this an issue, some may ask? Well, having resources within a community that requires either a membership or monthly fee immediately closes doors to individuals who are unable to make consistent payments or to those who frankly do not have the time due to their work schedules. In return, it sends an implicit message that some are valued

more than others because of their social status. This is the very reason why Alexander City needs more free resources for women, children, families, and college students. For example, women need mental wellness resources along with reproductive services that are at hardly no cost or no cost at all. While children benefit from the local library and all the resources it offers, they could benefit from more free events such as access to museums, computer labs, and free wellness activities at least once a week; this could even turn in to a family resource as well. While college students have access to many resources, it is necessary for many of those resources to be of little to no cost. Services that are both on and off campus, such as tutoring access, study groups, access to mental wellness, and health checkups are only some examples that would benefit a vast majority within the community. Providing more resources that are accessible for low-income families who live in Alexander City should also be in place here; resources, such as wellness services, vaccinations, and child care services to name a few.

While it is true that there are many issues that need to be resolved, teaching in Alexander City and attending different community events has made me realize that this city also has a positive side to it all. The majority of residents I have encountered are friendly people. They constantly work hard and thus have created a partnership, one in which has a strong sense of community. Community members here are quite active residents when it comes to partaking in local events. Some of these events include fundraisers, school events, volunteering of some sort, and of course social events such as concerts at the park are a couple of examples as to how this community spends some of their time. Residents take pride in all that they do for their community. At times, it can feel as if one were at an undergraduate social networking event.

Problematize the Issue

While Alexander City seems to grab the attention of many, it fails to recognize the history this city stands on. Like James Baldwin once said, “The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.” Educating residents and non-residents about their city’s history is a challenge, as there seems to be a sense of taboo and resistance on this subject. Even though this is a community in which many want to reside in, it is crucial to understand the roots of the city, the people who were living here first, and recognizing that this land was taken away from the Serrano and Tongva tribes during the establishment of the Spanish Missions, in particular the establishment of the San Gabriel Mission in 1771 (Pomona College (2020). 1884 and Before: [Alexander City].) alongside American settlers. The city of Alexander City was also home to Mexican ranchers during the time of the establishment of the San Gabriel Mission and after Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821. None of this important history is known to the community unless they go out of their own way to research it. The history and its recognition, however seems to be erased in this city and it is essential to “give credit where it’s due.”

Section 2- Community Events & Community Members

At our school, we have what we call morning meeting and it is a school-wide tradition that is done every Wednesday morning from 8-8:30. It is in essence, a form of showing school spirit. Students and staff all head out to the quad area outside, including parents who like to stay during this time. Morning meeting involves praising students for participating in acts that demonstrate kindness, helpfulness, responsibility, and other similar actions. Throughout their days, teachers and other staff members give students what is called a “Caught Being Good Slip.” This is a small sheet of paper that students receive whenever a teacher sees a student being

helpful, caring, or demonstrating some other acts of helpfulness. Students turn these “Caught Being Good” slips in to the office and their names get called by the principal and assistant principal each Wednesday morning. This school tradition occurs in front of the entire school; students get high-fived by the sixth grade class and receive a small prize in the form of a toy or pencil of their choice. Students enjoy this and look forward to Wednesday mornings.

Every year, kindergarten celebrates their 100th day of school. On this day, students have their schedule filled with fun. Each kindergarten teacher sets aside 30-45 minutes of fun center rotations that include counting with candies such as m&m’s, marshmallows, and counting 100 of the same item. Parents are also active participants on this day, as they get to also either be in charge of a center, help set up the centers, or take pictures of students during this time. The celebration of 100 days of school is a tradition that is done every year at my site. Throughout the day, students also get to watch different educational videos where they count to 100 and dance along. Teachers and students alike wear shirts with a cheesy or colorful phrase about being in school for 100 days. Mine was “100 Days Sprinkled With Glitter,” with sprinkles and cupcakes, of course.

Every year, all of the kindergarten classes go on a farm field trip sometime during the month of March. Since the overarching theme is on farm animals for half of March, students go on a field trip where they visit a farm. They get a full-on tour by some of the farmers as they explain how different fruits and vegetables grow throughout the different seasons of the year. Students also have the opportunity to pet and feed different farm animals, such as pigs, chickens, and cows. They even get to milk a cow. Parents are also allowed to attend the field trip but are required to pay their \$10 entrance fee. Students enjoy this trip, as they are given an opportunity to partake in a real-life experience on topics and themes they have been learning about in the

classroom. Unfortunately, this fun and hands-on experience did not occur this schoolyear due to the pandemic (COVID-19) we are all currently facing. The field trip was originally on March 13th. However, this was the day that school closures occurred all throughout the nation.

Having a kindergarten and first grade combination class means there are different standards that must get covered for both grade levels. But, it also means there are double the celebrations and parties in our class. While kindergarten does get to celebrate their 100th day of school, my first grade students celebrate their 50th day of school. All day, students learn about what life was like in the 1950s, what school was like, the kind of music that was popular, and how people used to dress. Students and teachers alike dress up like the 1950s and make root beer floats. I wore a long poodle skirt and some cat-eyed sunglasses that day. My students also learned about the different kinds of music that people used to listen to. We even created a short choreography and practiced dancing to music from the 1950s with a partner.

Events

The first event I attended was a school-wide meeting during the first week of March. The duration of the meeting was roughly around an hour and a half. The meeting covered many different topics in an orderly fashion. The staff meeting began with the establishing of norms first and then proceeded to the following topic on the agenda. Some of the norms included beginning and ending on time, being physically and mentally present, assume professional intent, and lastly, leave each meeting with clear action steps and new ideas. The principal opened up the space for teachers to celebrate any good news that they would like to share with the rest of the staff. The meeting was then followed by a thorough explanation of the precautions that the district has been taking and steps that the school will take in order keep everyone safe from this current pandemic. Some teachers were more concerned than others and emphasized on the

importance of reminding students to wash their hands frequently. After this conversation was over, half of the staff meeting and the conversations that came after that were centered on the book “10 Mindframes for Visible Learning.” Beginning this year, our school principal has assigned teachers to read specific chapters from the book, beginning with the first three. We were all counted off from one to three and whatever number we had was the chapter that we discussed in different groups. My group discussed chapter three which was focused on Response to Intervention, or RTI. We had discussions about the different tiers there are and how some teachers provide intervention using all three tiers. We also discussed the challenges that teachers have been faced with recently when it comes to collecting data in the form of formal and informal assessments when aides help during this time. There were also a few of the special education teachers in the group and one of them shared what teaching looks like for special education on a regular basis. She mentioned the importance of lesson planning and how to ensure each student is meeting their learning goals. She also shared with us the amount of work that gets put into providing intervention for her students and essentially provides all three tiers-and then some-for each student every single day. For example, she shared with us that she breaks her class into groups of three different centers. However, the fact that students are working in small groups does not necessarily mean that all of the students are working on the same assignment and thus, have different learning goals; this is what it looks like in each of her small centers. If there were two more tiers in the RTI framework, she is most definitely providing those in her classroom. We also discussed the importance of providing different forms of assessments when teaching and how helpful it can be when trying to pinpoint where a student is struggling in.

After having a deep discussion amongst our groups, our principal brought us back together and had two people from each of the three groups share what our chapter was on and

what we discussed. It was fascinating listening to what teachers from different grade levels had to say about their chapter and how they tied it to their own teaching experiences. Often times, there is hardly any time throughout the day to sit down with other teachers and ask what strategies they have been finding helpful in their classroom. Getting the perspective from the special education teachers was also quite the insight. At many schools, general education and special education teachers always seem to have this invisible barrier that divides them and the work they do, which is why our small groups were insightful and effective.

The second community event I attended was a fundraiser called McTeacher Night. McTeacher Night is a fundraiser that is usually done twice throughout the schoolyear. The first one occurs towards the beginning of the schoolyear and the second one was during the month of February. This fundraiser is a partnership that occurs at the local McDonald's that is a couple of blocks down from school, where teachers have the opportunity to work either in the drive-thru, serve orders, or prepare them. Everyone is welcome, whether it is staff, parents, or neighbors from the community. Almost all the teachers from every grade level attended McTeacher Night, including the assistant principal and the principal, along with other office staff as well. I got to interact with many of my students who came with their parents and siblings. Some stayed for a while chatting away with one another or with other parents from school and some ordered some food to go from the drive-thru and got to wave hello to the teachers who were on drive-thru duty. I had the opportunity to walk up to some of my students' tables and have a small chat with them and their family.

When I spoke to parents during McTeacher Night, they thought this fundraiser was a great idea. They enjoyed spending time with their children while they also had the opportunity to interact with other peers from school. Parents were also given the freedom to interact with other

parents they usually not might not have the time to interact with on a regular basis. Everyone always enjoys McTeacher Night. It is a time where parents, teachers, and other staff members get to take off their hats from the daily professional duties we all usually attend to and come together with a little bit of McDonald's, whether that is with a chocolate chip cookie or some chicken nuggets.

Services

The services this community has are not as many in comparison to other communities. It does, however have a local health and wellness club where members and non-members of the community can take classes, such as yoga, Pilates, or train in small groups with an instructor. There are also, "27 courts (20 lighted) and a vast array of programs for beginners to advanced levels. These include men's and women's weekly ladders, club socials, USTA teams and an outstanding junior program" (The Claremont Club (2020). The Claremont Club: Tennis & Racquets. Retrieved from <http://www.claremontclub.com/club/scripts/section/section.asp?NS=TR>). The community also has a big Girls Scout network where parents-typically moms-are actively engaged with weekly meetings and nonstop fundraising. Because the city itself is composed of seven colleges (five undergraduate and two graduate schools), there is wide network on different opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students as well as other scholars. There are also a few clinics that are available, with a few that have urgent care available. You can also find a local theatre and a small museum within the confines of this community along with a beautiful botanical garden that offers free classes every month. This suburban city has a community center that is located next to a park. Here, families and other members of the community have access to various classes, such as cooking, music, different styles of dance, and martial arts. "The Human Services recreation

brochure features new, seasonal, an longstanding activities and camps for individuals of all ages. Brochures are mailed to all [Alexander City] households and are available at various city facilities” (City of [Alexander City] (2020). Recreation Classes & Activities. Retrieved from <https://www.ci.claremont.ca.us/government/departments-divisions/human-services/recreation-classes-activities>). The community could, however, benefit from providing more nursing homes for the elderly alongside free health and wellness classes that specifically cater to this age group. Translation services from English to an array of different languages within the community is also still missing in public places, such as the post office, schools, the city court, and even the community center.

Problematize the Issue

This community currently has a couple of community events that occur on a yearly basis. However, I did notice that the majority of these events revolve around either an American holiday or a holiday that has a Catholic or Christian religious connection, such as Christmas, Spring Egg Hunt (usually done on Easter), Memorial Day, and Fourth of July. While there are a few other events that attend to children and families, the issue is that there are only a few (Kids corner, Monday Night concerts, and Summer movies in the park). The community does not have any events or services for the homeless population. Neither does it provide sufficient resources for those community members who are in search for a job, such as job fairs, resume assistance, weekly or monthly food drives for families in need that the middle and higher class may be unaware exist, especially without these events. In addition, there do not seem to be any events that provide translation services in another language. The only language available for the events within this community is English. This sends an implicit message to individuals what groups are welcomed and which ones are not. Community events that contribute towards the daily survival

of vulnerable groups are pretty absent here. Perhaps this is the case so Alexander City can continue to preserve the well-established reputation it has, which is a city that is mainly comprised of scholars, educators, PhDs, and other professionals. So, why provide services and events that can benefit the most vulnerable groups within society and invite them to a clean, research-based community and allow them to stay? So the community and overall city's value can decrease? I do not believe the middle and higher-class members here would be fond of this. A city that fails to provide assistance for its most vulnerable groups, whether it be a conscious or unconscious decision, automatically falls under the former.

Within this community, my students and their families have access to the local community center, the local library, and its parks for outdoor activities. Both students and parents have access to the school's after-school program. Math tutoring is also offered for elementary schools from January up until the end of the schoolyear. This service is specifically for student who are below grade level or could benefit from extra practice in math. Translation services are hardly available for students and/or families who speak another language. I know this to be the case because all the flyers for fundraisers, services, and sign-up sheets for volunteer work is always in English, despite the fact that there is a big population of families and students that speak another language.

Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

When COVID-19 was officially said to be a pandemic, our school closed its doors mid-March. News seemed to be constantly changing as minutes passed by that last day of school. After school dismissal, our entire school held what seemed to be a long and frightful meeting. Our school decided to switch to online learning. It has been optional, so teachers are given the choice to provide online instruction or not. Families who originally did not have access to

internet or a technological device was provided both resources through our school. Parents were able to check out their child's iPad from school. Students can now log in to their student portals and view assignments teachers have provided using a digital platform, such as canvas or Wonders. It has been a challenge switching to online instruction. I have found it much more tiresome doing this than being in the actual classroom. But like my mentor teacher always says, "we have to be flexible and bendy and improvise with what we've got" (Personal communication, D. Klinovsky, 2020)

Section 3- School Site Research

The School Site

Wilson Elementary is located in a suburban area, surrounded by closed cul-de-sacs all around. It is located on a small street that, if driving on the main streets, one would never know a school even exists. It is a one-story building that is comprised of two different campuses-one campus is specifically for students who have an impairment or disability where they receive a variety of services-and merged into one whole campus. The general and main campus looks like any other elementary school that was built during the 1980s. The classrooms have been built from red bricks and low somewhat low ceilings. There is a big sliding door in almost every classroom that has this layout, similar to a sliding door one has at home that takes you to your backyard. Because they are older buildings, the metal sliding doors are quite difficult to slide open and close and make your fingers hurt. Despite what the school looks like on the outside, it has a great reputation both in and outside of the community from students and families who attend the school but are from the city over. The school carries a sense of respect and safety once you set foot on campus. This school is not fond of disrespect and being unkind to others but rather making a difference in someone's life and demonstrating kindness. I know this to be true

based on the school's motto: "Be kind, be responsible, and be the best you can be: the choice is yours." Not only this, but the school administrators and staff work extremely hard to ensure to incorporate kindness and praise students who are demonstrating kindness, being responsible, and trying their best even when a task seems difficult both in and out of the classroom. The administrators at this school are constantly having professional development trainings for teachers and also provide aides with days where they too attend trainings. In fact, recently, the assistant principal and the principal prepared a training on social emotional learning and why it is important in the classroom no matter the grade level; feedback on ways to improve on a skill or on different teaching strategies are always welcome here.

Personnel

Due to the pandemic we are currently facing, the administrators, along with other important personnel at my site has been working diligently trying to make this school situation as normal as possible for our school community. It was a challenge trying to set up a time and day for an interview.

The first person who I spoke with was the lovely Mrs. Romero. She has been working at my site for 14 years and holds multiple hats as a paraeducator and noon duty aide. When speaking to Mrs. Romero, you get this feeling of peace; she is a natural nurturer. Whenever I am having a difficult day, she does not fail to make me feel better with her words, tight hugs, and contagious smile. *How can she always be so uplifting?* is what I would often ask myself. "My motivation is the children. It gives me great joy to make a difference in a child's life. We have a diverse population at [Wilson Elementary]. I am motivated to be a positive, consistent, and available person on campus" (Personal communication, R. Romero, 2020). I asked her what she thought about our school. At first, she was a bit hesitant; she was afraid as to

how I would react to her opinions. Soon after, she opened up and expressed her insights. Mrs. Romero let me know that, "... [Wilson] would be a school needing stability. We have had a frequent turnaround of administration and change in the past few years. I would love to see stability for our students, teachers, staff, and our PFA. [Wilson] is a unique campus which includes OH students. This is a huge benefit for all. Learning from each other is an amazing gift" (Personal communication, R. Romero, 2020). I also asked her what her ideal school culture would be. Mrs. Romero let me know that, " My ideal school culture would be a strong academic culture to include hands on learning, music, creative art, athletics, and tools to develop the whole child. Maybe even some life lessons in a creative way that aren't always taught at home (ex. patience, manners, empathy, etc.)" (Personal communication, R. Romero, 2020). She definitely has brilliant ideas that constitute an effective educator.

The second person who I interviewed was a kindergarten teacher named Mrs. Gendron. Mrs. Gendron has been working at this school for over 20 years. Prior to teaching kindergarten, she taught fourth grade for about seven years. I asked her about what it is like shifting from an upper elementary grade level to a primary grade. "I love kindergarten because students do not have to worry about so many state standards. I can teach in fun ways. And, they get excited for the smallest things like a stamp or a sticker" (Personal communication, D. Gendron, 2020). When I asked about her opinions on the school she serves, she said that, "This is a wonderful and unique school because we have two schools that are combined into one. The beauty of this is that our second campus attends to the needs of our disabled, orthopedically-impaired, and other students who have a disability" (D. Gendron, 2020). As she said this, she said it with much pride and joy on her face. Mrs. Gendron is a social being, one who is willing to put others before herself, especially when it is school-related.

Problematize the Issue

On a school-wide basis, the rules and policies are to demonstrate kindness whenever one can and to be responsible enough to make smart choices. Participating in bullying behavior and violence is also unwelcome here. The norms at this school site involve having parents volunteer in their child's classroom during center times or to help with prepping materials, making posters, and cutting all the projects that have been laminated. To ensure equity, technology is provided in every classroom. Grades first through sixth have a one-to-one ratio of iPads so each student has access to a technological device. Kindergarten also has access to iPads on a two-to-one ratio. Their devices stay at school at all times. However, with this pandemic, students who do not have access to a technological device or internet can communicate this to their teacher so that they can have access to these resources.

Since our school has a diverse population, teachers are required to have a time throughout their day and have English Language Development (ELD) time in order to meet the needs for their EL students. However, while this is what is supposed to look like, teachers already have so many responsibilities under their wing and more than likely do not have enough time within their schedule to fit in ELD time specifically for a few EL students. This, I have realized, is an issue many teachers have in schools. With all the responsibilities and standards to cover,-not including testing-finding the time on a regular school day has been challenging for many.

Our LGBTQ+ community is not big, although it is growing each year. The needs of these students are addressed in school through social emotional learning pedagogy that is embedded at when teaching. In my classroom, I have a student whose family consists of two moms. Whenever there is an activity that includes discussion on family or our households, I consciously ensure to mention to the class that a family can have the traditional mom and dad, single parent household,

or either two moms or two dads. This, I have realized has made my student with two moms feel much more included. Because of these kinds of conversations that go on in my classroom, my students have learned to become empathetic and welcoming to one another. Classroom parties and celebrations are now based on the season of the year rather than religious-based in order to address the needs for LGBTQ+ students and other students who do not celebrate certain holidays, such as Easter and Christmas.

Section 4- School Mission/ Vision & Demographics

Demographics

The student demographics at my school site consists of a diverse population. We serve roughly 530 students grades transitional kindergarten through sixth grade. 53 percent of the students are Hispanic, 31 percent are White, five percent of students are of two or more races, five percent are Black, four percent are of Asian descent, one percent of students are Filipino, and less than one percent of students identify as American Indian/Alaska Native. In addition, 56 percent of the students are males while 44 percent are females. The majority of the faculty and administration is White, with an estimate of over 75 percent identifying as White. There is a discrepancy between the student demographics and that of faculty and administration. There is more of a diverse student population than that of the actual teachers. It is also true that the majority of the school staff have only taught at this school. Therefore, the lack of having a diverse staff is quite visible. This is an issue for students of color or who are of more than one race because of the lack of representation amongst teachers. It is also vital in the lives of students of color, as they are more likely to succeed if curriculum is based on their life experiences. Examples of teachers doing this is seen in chapter one of Delpit's (2012) *Multiplication is For White People*. She explains to readers that, "If the curriculum we use to teach our children does

not connect in positive ways to the culture young people bring to school, it is doomed to failure” (*Multiplication is For White People*, p. 21).

Mission/ Vision

At my current school, our mission statement states that our school, “... will provide challenging academic experiences that will encourage each child to reach his/her full academic and social potential. Learning will occur in a safe and caring environment that fosters excitement, enthusiasm, and discovery. Students will be encouraged to appreciate their own worth and importance, as well as that of others. [Wilson Elementary] will provide an atmosphere that will enable each child to develop a respect for the differences of others and nurture a sense of responsibility to the community and the environment” ([Wilson Elementary School] (2018). Our School Missions Statement. Retrieved from <https://sum-claremont-ca.schoolloop.com/sumnerelementary>). Prior to the current mission statement, it was in the revision process. Our administrators held a staff meeting prior to the beginning of the schoolyear. Here, each teacher gave their input on what changes could be made to our site’s mission statement. Therefore, the site’s mission statement is one that was created altogether. My school site targets this vision in multiple ways. The faculty at this school ensures to provide challenging opportunities through their pedagogy and integrating instruction in order to ensure students are always learning. Professional development days are provided throughout the schoolyear for all teachers. These are trainings that teachers receive for their targeted grade level. In doing so, they acquire more knowledge on different tools and strategies they can use in their classroom. Other professional development days include how to integrate art into science or how to teach science using the NGSS standards.

In order to ensure that learning occurs in a safe and caring environment, our school constantly strives to transmit positivity onto our students through the way we speak to all of our students and parents on campus. Students begin to practice kindness and practice the best they can be because they hear this message every morning through the intercom as the morning message is announced. Additionally, students are praised whenever a staff member notices that a student was being responsible, practicing kindness, or going the extra mile when completing their work. Students receive a “Caught Being Good” slip and on that slip, the staff member briefly describes why that student earned a slip. Students can then turn it in to the office for a stamp on their hand and will be praised during our Wednesday’s morning meeting. In order to remain true to the vision statement, my school site has also adopted what is called Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS). What this does is that students receive praises that are near and dear to the student, rather than praising a student with a “good job.” For example, if a student does not have enough support where he/she does not feel encouraged or supported, and makes the choice to compromise with the teacher by beginning their work, the teacher can further that encouragement along the lines of “Thank you (insert name here) for getting to work instead of being upset having to do it, I really appreciate it.” Instead of saying “good job,” students are praised on what actually applies to them.

“It takes a village” applies when it comes to providing support for our school; everyone, from parents to volunteers contribute what they can. The vision statement at my school fosters a positive and collaborative relationship with community members through fundraisers within the community itself and by supporting local businesses. This allows for our families to interact with other community members and builds new relationships.

My school's mission statement is a part of my classroom culture. From the beginning, my classroom has embedded social emotional learning at all times. However, I would be lying if I said that it is easy making it a part of my pedagogy and classroom lifestyle, especially as a new teacher. My students learn the importance of kindness and respect and how it can go a long way. It is part of my classroom culture because I believe that students should have academically-challenging experiences so that they can reach their personal and academic potential. I also believe that students should be taught in multiple ways, rather than relying solely on worksheets and lecturing. This will not allow students to reach their fullest potential because it will not challenge them in a way that continues to feed their curiosity.

Problematicize the Issue

Parent involvement is quite common at my school. If there is a parent or a few parents helping out in a teacher's classroom, it is not foreign to staff and students. There usually are more parent helpers in the lower grades, as those grade levels require more hands-on activities, creating small projects frequently, and the constant use of manipulatives during learning. However, in order for parents to feel welcomed to volunteer in a teacher's classroom, the teacher must establish a relationship with parents and maintain it through daily communication. I have also found that creating sign-up sheets for different tasks welcomes more parents. This gives them the ability to choose themselves the type of volunteer work they will be assisting with. While some parents do not mind filing papers and helping set up centers, other parents would much rather help out with teaching a center and actively engaging with the students. If parents have the opportunity to work with their own child at some given point the day they stop by to volunteer, it encourages them to become more involved in the classroom. This even leads to them helping out during two different time slots in the day or better yet, helping out on more

than one or two days out of the week. While this promotes parent and family involvement, I have noticed that parents become discouraged when a teacher fails to communicate. Parents like to stay informed on what their child is learning, as well as events that are occurring at school. Communication all ties back to the rapport between the parents and the teacher. I believe that is the foundation that makes parents feel welcomed.

Section 5- Classroom Reflection

Ecology

While it can be a challenge creating and maintaining a safe space for students, the constant efforts to keep this space safe is well worth it. In my classroom, I strive to ensure my classroom ecology is welcoming of all students. I view myself as what Delpit (2012) calls a *warm demander*. Teachers who identify as being a warm demander, "...help students realize that they can achieve beyond anything they may have believed" (*Multiplication is For White People*, pp. 78-79). My mentor teacher and I always try to embed conversations in the classroom on ways students can be empathetic and show kindness to one another, whether that is in or outside of class. Teaching students these life skills all year long is what has maintained a safe and welcoming classroom ecology. Because it is essential to "practice what you preach," I also try to set an example for students and demonstrate the same towards them, staff, and parents. By incorporating these tools on a daily basis, it creates an environment where students feel safe to be themselves without shame. At this moment in time, the entire world is facing a pandemic but before this, my classroom looked colorful and felt fun to be around. When you walk in, you will see student work on the walls and small art activities hung from the ceiling. Because my classroom is a combination class of two different grade levels, the student work that is hung on the walls and the ceilings consists of kindergarten work on one wall and first grade work on the

opposite wall. There are small, long tables where kindergarten usually sits when it is time for an activity. The first graders have their very own desks so they all sit near one another. They also sit at the long tables, although it is usually during whole-group work (both kindergarten and first graders) such as centers. In essence, I would say my classroom feels like a home away from home for students.

While many teachers have different seating charts for every activity students engage in, the only seating charts that we actually use in class are the first grade desks and the seating chart at the carpet area. In the morning, students are greeted through the door with a “good morning” from my mentor teacher and I. Everyone goes into their cubbies to place their snacks, lunches, and other belongings away. In our classroom, students wear their slippers (optional) that their parents have brought in for them to use in this space, so they will most likely do this after putting their belongings away. Kindergarten heads on over to the kidney-shaped table and grabs the activity they are to work on for the next 20 minutes, while our first graders have their own activity on their individual desks. This is a routine that has been put in place since the first day of school. I find it to be a smooth transition from the morning good-byes and kisses that occur during drop-off. Not to mention the answering of questions that parents have before they drive off to work or attend to other duties. Students are aware of what they can also work on once they are finished with their morning work and where to put this work. Depending on what moment throughout the schoolyear we are in, first grade goes off to Response to Intervention, or RTI at around 8:15 in the morning. If RTI is not occurring, first grade also works on their early finisher that usually is a booklet of English Language Arts activities based on our curriculum. Everyone comes together at the carpet area and we all do our morning check-ins. This may or may not include circle time and answering a small prompt. We then go on to do the calendar. This is

roughly around 20 minutes, followed by some movement time. After this, first grade goes back to their desks and complete a few more pages from their ELA booklet and have the option to log on to i-ready on an iPad for about ten minutes. i-ready is an application our school uses for reading, where students read a book and can take small quizzes and earn stars as they go. In the meantime, kindergarten is working on some form of an ELA activity with either my mentor teacher or myself, while our first graders head on out to recess. We switch, or as she likes to call it, “we flip flop” (D. Klinovsky, personal communications, April 2020) in order for us to work with both classes. Although, I usually tend to work with first grade a bit more.

While other teachers on campus use the clip chart system as their behavior reinforcement, I do not use it my our classroom because it does not seems consistent to use. Believe it or not, I use a lot of PBIS strategies (as mentioned above in “Section 4”). I have found it quite helpful and plan to continue using it next schoolyear. However, there are occasions where students are distracted because they are talking to their peers. In this situation, I just move the student and explain to them why. Very rarely do I use the principal as a reinforcement.

In my classroom, students’ assets and funds of knowledge are highlighted throughout instruction. There is no formula as to how this is done in my classroom. my mentor teacher and I simply listen and pay attention to what our students’ interests are, what they like, and their overall personality as an individual. Having this important piece of information is the guide that I use to highlight my students’ assets and funds of knowledge. For example, if I know that some of my students are into space, I might use this information and teach a science lesson on space or read a story about space during story time. I also have a student who is half African-American and half Persian. However, I would not have known he is Persian had I not spoken to students in Spanish here and there. Because my mom is somewhat fluent in Farsi, I knew some basic words

that I could use in the classroom. This soon opened up conversations about people speaking different languages aside from English. We even greeted one another in a different language during circle a couple of days later.

Demographics

My kindergarten and first grade class consists of 15 kindergarteners and 10 first graders; I have 12 girls and 13 boys. One of my students is a native Spanish speaker and less than a quarter of my students speak some Spanish. As mentioned in the above paragraph, I have a student who speaks a bit of Farsi. None of my students are identified as GATE, although the majority of them are above their grade level. I do, however, have a student who has both a 504 plan and an IEP. Based on our student's plans, my mentor teacher and I accommodate for this student by providing markers and a felt pen in his pencil box, aside from crayons. He rarely uses a pencil when it comes to writing, thus explaining the felt pen. Because our student has arms that end at elbow length, he usually uses a boxed chair that has arm rests. This prevents his body from sliding off the chair and maintains an upright posture.

Problematize the Issue

In my classroom, the resources that I have are iPads, a projector, and a document camera. There are also a couple of desktop computers that students have access to. Shifting away from the technology aspect, we also have access to English Language Arts and math curriculum, both in which provide the California state standards for English learners and the resources when teaching ELs. We also have school supplies, such as construction paper, printing paper, crayons, and pencils. However, there were not enough crayon boxes to give a box to the entire class had my mentor teacher and I relied solely on the school. We had extra school supplies, such as glue sticks and crayons from parent donations. These school supplies are somewhat lacking at Wilson

Elementary that are essential to have in any classroom. I also believe there should be a few more staff members to supervise students when students are at recess. This alleviates teachers so they can continue to plan upcoming lessons or do the minor things humans do, like eating a snack or using the restroom. When teaching a combination class, there are hardly any moments for breaks and can be stressful if one is not even able to use the restroom and eat a snack.

To conclude, this ethnography has been written to share the narrative with a lens that tends to problematize almost anything and everything. This is my story and the story of what Bettina Love calls *abolitionist teacher*. As James Baldwin once said, “the paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.”

Part D: Reflection of a Critical Social Justice Educator

Classroom Ecology & Teacher Presence

Teaching and being a full-time student has not been the most easiest task that a person does. In fact, it is one of the most challenging things you can do. This also meant that I had to show up to school for my students every day, regardless if my students and their families were facing inconsistencies in their personal lives. By me showing up, despite how challenging it was to balance teaching, academics, and some form of personal life, I communicated to students that I was here to stay. I communicated to them that I played a huge role in their learning process by being my students. As time went by, students knew that I was invested in their learning process as I paid close attention to each and every one of their individual needs. As a novice teacher, it was not an easy task to ensure the needs of each student are being met. There were times where some of their needs were not met. When these kinds of situations occurred, their needs had to be met a different way through constant reflection and finding different tools and teaching strategies

that I found effective in our classroom. Trial and error is how I began to notice what worked with some students and what did not work with other students. And when I say that students notice or sense a teacher's efforts to meet their needs and make compromises, it is not an exaggeration. As I began to allow my students to voice their opinions on what they were fond of and what they were not so fond of (like coloring the picture after finishing writing the sentences), it communicated to them that our classroom was a collective and their feedback was welcome. It was not easy to get accustomed to receiving feedback, despite it being constructive. It required my ego being placed to the side or it being crushed. Perhaps this is why some refer to teaching as humbling.

The classroom is where teachers and students alike, spend the majority of their days. Setting and demonstrating expectations for different situations in the classroom sounded too complex to keep up with, so our classroom consisted of a specific set of norms that was applicable to any situation or setting, whether it was time for math with my first graders or English Language Arts with my kindergarteners, or whether we were all just sitting around in a circle having a conversation as a whole. While we did not necessarily call them expectations, students were aware that our classroom norms consisted of first and foremost being kind to one another, being safe, being respectful towards one another, helping a friend when they were in need of help, and being responsible. Although these norms may sound vague or similar to other classrooms, we always had conversations on what these looked like in our class, in another teacher's classroom, and how they were also applicable to any other setting that did not involve school. I learned the hard way that no classroom norm or expectation is viewed as having value unless I, the teacher, am the one to set the example first; I, too am a student. What this means is that I had to be the person to apply these expectations consistently every single day before

holding my students accountable. This kept both myself and my actions accountable, in turn also being able to consistently hold my students accountable for their actions. I also found that revisiting specific expectations/norms to be helpful when a student or students were having a difficult time with some of them. Revisiting sometimes consisted of either whole-group discussions or one-on-one discussions about an incident that had occurred or hypothetical examples. The outcome of being consistent in expectations is having more time for hands-on learning, the ability to handle more responsibilities, and frankly, more fun. Both my students and myself were able to maximize our time for productivity and meaningful learning experiences. Of course, this did not come easy at first, nor was I able to accomplish this on my first few attempts. This I find to be especially true for novice teachers such as myself.

Being new to the field of teaching, I knew that I wanted to provide culturally responsive teaching in my classroom. I just did not have the proper vocabulary to do so in the beginning of my journey as a first-year teacher. And just like a first-year teacher, I struggled to find my teaching identity. I would say that this journey has been evolving over time. However, I knew from the very beginning that I wanted our classroom to be one that accepted the different cultures and identities that each of my students brought in with them. Too often, students feel as though they do not belong in their classroom like the rest of their peers. This is especially true for students of color who might feel like an outcast and labeled due to preconceived notions, especially if their teacher is not doing work on becoming a more effective critical social justice educator. This oftentimes results in our lack of awareness of the behaviors we engage in, which does not lessen the reality of its impact but it makes it more likely that these behaviors will continue to occur (Sensoy & DiAngelo, "Is Everyone Really Equal?", 2017, p. 95).

Being a woman of color, I remember having many teachers of color in elementary school. Although I do not remember every academic lesson they taught me, I do recall that those teachers made me and the rest of my classmates feel like we were at home and comfortable being our genuine selves to the point where I was not hyper aware of myself and the way I spoke nor the way I looked until high school. Having the ability to make students feel at ease and making their identities feel valued is one of the best compliments a teacher could ever receive. In our classroom, different languages were always welcome. As a native Spanish speaker, I found it helpful and more responsive to provide students with a sprinkle of Spanish during instruction time. From asking students to write their *nombres* at the top of their papers to having full-on class conversations to what their favorite *paleta/nieve* flavor was, (some liked *tamarindo*, *limón*, *fresa*, and *horchata*) it was communicated that different languages were welcome *siempre*. I had a student in my classroom who was somewhat timid whenever there was a change in our routine or involved the trying of something new (a new food/snack or a new addition to our schedule). Speaking to my students in Spanish whenever I could pushed for new and exciting conversations that sparked the interest of my students to learn how to speak the language their parents and grandparents speak. It also tended to spark conversations on other languages they may hear their families speak at home. I even found out that one of my students was/is learning how to speak Farsi at home and with his grandparents as I briefly mentioned one morning that my mom speaks Farsi. I would have most likely gone the rest of the schoolyear without having known this about my student. Additionally, I found that incorporating different music genres where they can make connections to their home or what they may consider as part of their culture in our classroom. This created space for more meaningful learning, as students began to feel safe and less worried about leaving their parents in the mornings or less concerned about their cultural wealth.

What I always found crucial to do in my classroom was to have conversations about the equal treatment of others regardless of skin tone, hair type, or any other outer appearance that students will innocently bring up. Students were shocked and could not believe that there was a thing called segregation in our history, where students had to attend different schools and were always separate everywhere because of the color of a person's skin. As their teacher, it was important to me to open up the space and have conversations, such as segregation, racism, and unequal treatment. Delpit (2019) states that unless we (teachers) address the most difficult conversations on race and racism in school, "we cannot hope to achieve a democracy that truly is for all" (*Teaching When the World Is On Fire*, p. 37). And she makes a valid point and from my perspective, is right. Because as Love (2019) states, "education is not the antecedent of failing schools, poverty, homelessness, police brutality, and/or crime. Racism is; racism that is built on centuries of ideas that seek to confuse and manipulate we who are dark into never mattering to one another in this country" (*We Want to Do More Than Survive*, p. 41). And because racism and injustices based on race occur, it is important to facilitate conversations on race in the classroom. Delpit (2019) also goes on to give helpful tips for teachers on how to approach these difficult conversations in the classroom, beginning with establishing a classroom environment where students feel safe and is a respected space that allows the questioning of ideas.

Aside from conversations on race and the fair treatment of others, social emotional learning was a practice that I quickly realized goes a long way. Students will always need social emotional learning just as much as they need the academic aspect of school. I had the opportunity to sub for three days for a third grade classroom at the same school I was doing my teacher residency. My initial reactions to that class was: 'Boy do these poor students need social emotional learning ASAP!' So social emotional learning it was. The students were rude to one

another and from what I could sense, the teacher hardly bothered to fully address issues that would rise to the surface. This is it truly hit me that students need their teacher to open up a safe space for them to engage in dialogue and conversations on issues that are below the surface of the iceberg. Without accomplishing this piece first, there was no possible way for me to even teach or transition these students into any form of academic work. And so I did not. The extra energy I was going to place in putting out fires sounded so counterproductive, and so all academics was placed on pause until students were finally granted the opportunity to voice their opinions. It worked. In fact, the assistant principal walked in later and to her surprise, my students were actually engaging in learning? (Apparently the assistant principal walks in three to four times per day in that class. Yikes!) And so this is why I do not underestimate the power of social emotional learning.

Content Knowledge to Promote Access, Learning, and Achievement

As I dove right into my first year of teaching, boy did I have not a single clue about the numerous standards that existed. I did not even know this was a thing. Boy was I such a novice/newbie. I laugh now as I look back as to how naïve I was. Now that I possess more knowledge and wisdom, I would have to say that curriculum can be a double-edged sword, depending on what curriculum a teacher's school offers. The school I was at during my first year had such great curriculum that made it less stressful to begin with. I know this was not the case for many of my peers. It can be tempting, however, to feel overwhelmed from the amount of resources that the teacher's books/manuals come with. Not to mention the all the extra lessons and steps available. What I found helpful for myself was to ask for my team for a pacing guide for the entire schoolyear. Having this guide allowed me to backwards plan a unit for the month or so. While some teachers may or may not have a physical pacing guide for an entire

schoolyear, I also found I would not have had this insight early on in the schoolyear had I not actively collaborated, asked the many questions, wrote everything down, and double checked teacher agendas with my kindergarten and first grade teams during our team meetings. I also liked the idea that Dra. Bermúdez gave us of creating a binder with all the ELA and ELD state standards for our specific grade level(s). By the way, ¡*gracias profe!* Sometimes, the old-fashioned style of reading the standards more than once has been useful (I had to reread some over five times). By doing so, it allowed myself to reflect on whether certain goals required more than a lesson or two and what/how to differentiate for the different needs of my students. Throughout my journey as a first-year teacher, I have learned the significance of understanding the standards for my grade levels. Not only has developing facility with common core standards and the school's curriculum made lesson planning bearable, but it has also allowed myself to interweave other subjects into my lessons. I would intentionally do so in order to include the interests of other students and keep their curiosity running. For example, if I were to be teaching a lesson on prefixes, I might incorporate a song on prefixes and even have students create new words through the lens of math and addition.

In my classroom, I noticed that the less time I gave students the opportunity to sit next to their friends or the ability to choose where they would like to sit for different activities, the more they wanted to do so. What I decided to do was to come to a compromise with my students. If they were able to stay on-task during instruction time while sitting next to their friend(s), they were given the freedom to sit where they chose. While this was not the “remedy” for students to stay engaged, it did make a difference in the learning experiences they were having by giving them the agency to simply choose. From having the option of using a crayon or marker at times instead of a pencil to flexible seating, giving students a variety of options in the classroom

brought out their different personalities as they began to feel comfortable being themselves in our class. I also tried to provide students with different ways for them to be aware of specific instructions on assignments through the use of a visual representation of directions on the white board, constantly checking for their understanding by asking them whether they understood the instructions or if more clarification was needed. Because each student absorbs knowledge and learns differently than another student, the use of words, phrases, color-coding, and visuals were used on a daily basis. Hand movements and music was also incorporated into their learning experiences because who does not like music? Music and movement benefitted my students who needed more one-on-one support; they were able to learn content, such as their vowels, consonants, the job of a verb, and sounding out words through songs. It also gave them movement time, which their bodies always needed.

Instructional Practices to Promote Learning and Engagement

As the days, weeks, and months continued to pass, I realized the value of lesson planning (and over planning whenever I could find the time to do this). Being a first-year teacher, lesson planning felt like so much work-and it always was! However, the feeling of being able to address the different needs of my students was, and is, one of the best feelings a teacher could ever feel. Teaching with intentionality as best as possible goes a long way. As the teacher, it was up to me to understand where my students were at academically, socially, and emotionally. Oftentimes, trial and error was my best friend; some instructional practices worked on certain days while it was a total fail by Friday. What I also found effective in our classroom is the use of group or partner work. Incorporating some form of group work every day gives students the opportunity to collaborate and socialize with classmates they usually may not interact with on their own. It also allows the transaction of different ideas and perspectives they may not have thought of.

Assessments to Inform Instruction and Promote Learning

When placing students into groups, I ensured to do this in a strategic way where I knew that each and every single one of their academic and social-emotional needs were to be met as best as possible (because there is no such thing as perfection). If I have a student who was more of an introvert, I usually would pair that student up with a student who gets along with every student and is more social than my shy student. I would have to say that meeting my students where they were academically and socio-emotionally was not an easy task, especially when some students require more teacher time than others. What I decided to do was to begin the majority of my lessons or activities as a whole group in order for students to have more of an understanding of the learning outcomes. During math time with my first graders, I specifically began every math lesson with a pre-assessment in order to develop my students' analytical skills. This allowed both myself and my students to assess what they remember (or do not remember) from our last math lesson. As a class, we would briefly review the pre-assessment question(s) and would transition into the math lesson for the day. I used assessments on a daily basis. They were a mixture of exit tickets, pre-assessments, and informal and/or formal assessments, depending on what our lesson was about. All of the different forms of assessments were used as a way for me to either receive feedback from my students or give my students feedback on their work individually or as a collective. As Hattie states, "feedback thrives on errors, which we believe should be expected and celebrated because they are opportunities for learning." (Hattie, Fisher, and Frey, *Visible Learning for Mathematics*, 2017, p. 207). Classrooms have to be a safe place for errors to be recognized, as well as normalized.

Because students had different needs, our math lessons consisted of guided practice in the beginning, followed by a mixture of independent work, partner work, and teacher time. What this

means is that students were given the different options to choose from; they were allowed to work on their own, with a partner, or with myself in a small group for students who benefitted from more scaffolding. Scaffolding during math time almost always consisted of white boards, linking cubes (other manipulatives too), a number chart when necessary, some markers, and a couple of other tools. Looking back, it actually looked like it was fun.

Social Justice Dispositions to Promote Access, Learning, Achievement and Future Opportunity and Success

As the months of the schoolyear began to pass, I began to notice that a few of my students were always quite anxious to do math and loved every second of it. They were my students who learned a concept quickly. Soon enough, it led to many interruptions at the very beginning of math. While I did not want my students to interrupt, I knew I was doing them a disservice by keeping them with the rest of our class at this time. However, I still wanted them to interact with both myself and their other peers. I felt as if I had hit a wall and had nowhere else to turn to. What I decided to do was to introduce each math lesson, work on a few math problems with the entire class, and then dismiss my advanced learners after with their own set of instructions on what they were going to work on. This allowed me to meet my students where they were academically, instead of keeping them from their learning journey. It turns out that differentiating for advanced learners is far more challenging than providing differentiation for my non-advanced students. In my opinion, at least. Figuring out ways to differentiate always seemed to keep me on my toes, whether it was for math, ELA, reading, art, social science, or science. Another form of meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs that I used in my classroom was Response to Intervention (RTI). “RTI focuses on providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make

decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important educational decisions (Hattie, Fisher, and Frey, *Visible Learning for Mathematics*, 2017, p. 241). RTI was done three out of the five days of the school week, while changing the individual goals of students every six weeks.

Teaching students life lessons and how to have a better control of their emotions was mostly accomplished through read-alouds with books that taught life lessons, such as personal space, sharing, controlling emotions, and being kind to others. Conversations followed after each read aloud, and students would refer back to these conversations and stories when faced with socio-emotional challenges.

At school, it can be easy to keep ideas from other teachers. I was grateful enough to have had helpful and collaborative team members for the grade levels I taught. This in turn created a stronger relationship between us teachers and made it easier to share any knowledge or resources. I hope this next schoolyear, my team is also collaborative and supportive of sharing resources and knowledge with one another. Coming in as a first-year teacher, I did face a bit of a challenge with my credibility whenever sharing ideas or resources. It did bother me a bit in the beginning, however this perspective shifted throughout the schoolyear. I decided to continue to share any suggestions or ideas I had and allowed my team to decide for themselves whether to use them or not; at the end of the day, I had peace knowing that what I was sharing would benefit our students. Eventually, some of the teachers placed what seemed to be their ego, to the side and took suggestions into account in their classroom.

Conclusion

This portion of my ethnography has been a humbling experience to reflect and write about as a first-year teacher. As I look back on the first class (TLP I) last summer, it seems as if

it were so long ago when in reality, it was only a year ago. I am grateful to have acquired all the knowledge that I now possess. Who would have thought that I would have acquired so much knowledge by just one year? This is a bittersweet moment as I continue on to my journey as a teacher into the field of education and advocate for my students in the public educational system. PhD program, I am coming for you next, our schools need more transforming.

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